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# **CONTENT MATTERS – HOW TO MAKE GOOD CONTENT MARKETING**

Practitioners' views on creating winning content

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# ABSTRACT

Arja Kulmala: Content matters – How to make good content marketing. Practitioners' views on creating winning content  
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Content marketing has developed into a relevant tool in companies' marketing communications mix of today. As the discipline is fairly new, the theoretical framework for content marketing is still under development and looking for its domain, similarly as the practices for implementing content marketing within companies. In its essence, engaging content is seen as a way to increase a company's success which makes it a relevant field of research in media management.

This thesis aims to define the field of today's content marketing and find an answer to the question 'How to make good content marketing' through looking for prerequisites for planning and producing effective content marketing.

Based on earlier research, the thesis first presents an illustration of the field depicting it as e.g. storytelling aimed at a profitable customer action, as means of creating engagement for enhanced brand benefits, and as a tool for generating sales as part of a sales funnel. Interconnectivity of different elements is visible in a framework presented by Charmaine du Plessis (2015) who states that marketers are increasingly turning towards content marketing to replace interruptive advertising and to attract more attention to their brand.

As content marketing professionals were considered as a good source for analysing the prerequisites for good content marketing, they were chosen as informants of the study. The data for the research was collected in 15 thematic interviews. Of the interviews, seven were conducted among companies using content marketing. Eight interviews were done among professionals of A-lehdet Oy, the Finnish media company, who provide content marketing strategies, solutions and production for their customer companies. The interview data was analysed in a qualitative content analysis by applying the framework of du Plessis as the working theory.

The research provided support for du Plessis's framework, finding all its elements relevant but emphasizing the importance of the strategic element as the most important basis for content marketing decisions. Moreover, the research found essential additional factors that should be considered when implementing content marketing. As a result, the thesis presents a modified framework that consists of the following elements; 1) why, 2) to whom, 3) where and what, 4) setting the objectives and following the results, 5) inclusion of novel contents – the 'wows', 6) notion on human behaviour, and 7) decisions on work division of different content marketing actions.

In addition to providing a useful framework for content marketing planning and implementation, the results indicate that content marketing is very likely to keep increasing as means of marketing communications among Finnish companies also. The widening of the scope of functions included in content marketing processes will contribute to the further professionalisation of the field and help to make corporate content shine as – sometimes – more appealing content than that of the traditional media's. The interviewees agreed that the power of content marketing will still accrue from the content itself, and therefore, companies should aim at producing high-quality, targeted content for their audiences with ambition for creativity and novel trials also.

Keywords: Content marketing, content strategy, targeting, storytelling, engagement, sales funnel.

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1 Background**

Content marketing is a newcomer within the marketing field. Academic research and theoretical conceptualisation of content marketing have, however, developed during the past few years as its practical implementation as a tool in a company's marketing mix has constantly increased.

The scope of content marketing has widened from referring merely to 'content' that a company sends to its shareholders to being essential means, among other things, for customer interaction and an effective booster of sales in today's new digital marketing era.

In a nutshell, engaging content is seen as a way to increase a company's success. It either strengthens the company brand, resulting in a long-term value increase of the company, or, more directly, increases sales of the company's products or services via direct links to the company's – mostly digital – sales funnels. Its effect is said to lie in the power of content – with its ability to tell stories and raise emotions – to create relationships and nurture dialogue with the company's customers. (Pulizzi 2012)

In the U.S., approximately 90% of BtoC, or Business-to-Consumers, companies already create and send content to their customers as part of their marketing communications operations. And content marketing budgets are on the rise; 57% of marketers expect their content marketing budget to increase in 2019 compared with 2018. (CMI 2019)

Amplifying the significance of the content marketing field, many communications professionals – such as the interviewee participants of my study – think that in the audience's eyes there is no longer difference whether the content is sent by traditional media or a company as long as it is good.

Thus, as there is a widening view that content marketing – often referred to as inbound, or pull, marketing (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016, 164) – has become an important part of the marketing mix, either supplementing or, in many cases, outperforming the effects of traditional, or outbound marketing, it is very important for a company to know how to implement content marketing so that it works.

If examined as different business operations of a firm, content marketing combines activities such as communications, marketing, and sales. In its current form, it also

inherently includes the world of digital platforms and technologies – together with more tangible media products as printed magazines and even planning and organising events – and all the offerings that come with the digital infrastructure, such as user experience design, web engine optimisation and data analytics, social media channels and other digital means of reaching out to the customers of a company.

Something that first seemed to be storytelling to a company's interest groups has turned into a multifaceted world of sciences, business areas, technologies, tools, and processes. Despite all this, the content marketing world tends to repeat the phrase of 'quality content' as the core of everything (Vik 2016), and, still, the most important part of content marketing.

Is the content focus still valid in today's content marketing? What else is essential when implementing content marketing and why? The purpose of this study is to examine how a company can secure the production of good content marketing.

## **1.2 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis was born out of an interest to examine how practitioners of content marketing could make sure that they are implementing good content marketing.

I am starting my work by acknowledging the potential conflict of interests in my research in Chapter 1.3. Specifically, I decided to study the topic by interviewing professionals in the field, including my working colleagues at the media company A-lehdet Oy and a few companies that are either customers of A-lehdet or interest A-lehdet as potential customers. As this setting naturally causes a risk for objectivity of my study, it needs to be recognised by a reader of the thesis.

Content marketing can be examined from a variety of angles depending on the context. As the discipline is fairly new, the theoretical framework for content marketing is still under development and looking for its domain. Based on a literature review, I am presenting a variety of theories and definitions on content marketing in Chapter 2. My viewpoint in the research is that of the senders of content marketing; not that of the readers as it could also be. From the theories, Charmaine du Plessis' (2015a) classification of matters that content marketing practitioners should consider offers a useful framework for examining my research question. The presentation of her framework ends Chapter 2.

Chapter 3. introduces the research question that I am seeking an answer to in my research data – the interviews – and their analysis.

When looking for the keys for producing good content marketing, I assumed that the professionals of the field – both senders of content marketing messages and producers of them – have the best knowledge of the results of their content marketing efforts. In other words, they know what works according to the objectives they have set, and what, thus, represents good content marketing for them. I therefore decided to use these professionals as the data source of my research, selecting theme interviews for my data collecting method. The choice of the research method is explained in Chapter 4.

Chapter 5. moves forward to the classification of the research data. I am using the framework provided by du Plessis (2015a), and placing the findings from my interviews under the categories she found relevant when planning and implementing content marketing.

As not all the interview data fell under du Plessis' categories, I decided to examine the remainders separately. The points of view that were not included in the original research framework are presented in Chapter 6. with the argument that these issues are also relevant in content marketing decisions. As the research showed that the initial theoretical framework I used in the classification of my interview data excluded items that also are essential in regard to my research question, I am concluding my thesis with a presentation of a modified framework. It is intended to work as a practical tool for content marketing providers to secure production of good content marketing.

Chapter 7. ends the thesis with discussion and conclusions.

### **1.3 Me as an A-lehdet employee**

My research is based on two sets of interviews: the first one with the selected A-lehdet Oy employees, and the second one with the companies that are interesting as customers or potential customers for A-lehdet Oy's content marketing and media sales operations.

I myself work at A-lehdet Oy as a strategist. The strategist is responsible for BtoB, or Business-to-Business, sales in Content Studio, which includes A-lehdet's content marketing functions. In other words, she looks for new corporate or organisational customers for A-lehdet's content marketing solutions business and nurtures existing customer relationships

by ensuring that the companies get what they are promised and what they need, or that their objectives for cooperation are constantly achieved – and, naturally, hopefully exceeded.

I know all the A-lehdet interviewees, some better, some less well, and with some of them I cooperate daily both in business and personally. I also know A-lehdet's organisation, the position of content management function there, as well as the employment positions of my colleagues.

The same applies to some of the companies whose representatives I interviewed; most of them are either existing customers of A-lehdet Oy's Content Studio or its media sales, and the rest of them I have followed for work-related or personal interests.

As is self-evident, this setting includes a certain starting scene for my research.

As an A-lehdet representative, I naturally do not want to offend any of our customers or potential customers by presenting them in an unfavourable light in my study. The same applies to my colleagues and, additionally, there was also concern that my interviews with them might get too relaxed in regard to the need to gather hard research facts.

These are all valid points of concern – so why did I then want to do my research on this topic and with these participants?

Firstly, content marketing interests me both personally and professionally. My background is in journalism, and even at A-lehdet Content Studio I have long worked with content production, on the 'creative side' of content management, before moving to my current position in sales. I truly love great content; I am a big fan of narratives and touching stories. Therefore, the development of content marketing, as I see it, from the mere act of telling stories into a broad combination of interrelated functions around the field fascinates me as phenomenon. This inherent interest should be a good start for an interesting study also, I thought.

The same setting is seen at A-lehdet. This house is a great journalistic storyteller that has ambitiously started selling its storytelling skills. This commercialisation of the art of journalism has demanded, and constantly demands, a lot of strategic work for acquiring and securing the knowhow needed and for building an organisation capable of competing in the field. Today, A-lehdet is one of the market leaders in content marketing – I find this

beneficial for my study as these people follow the field from the front line. With the help of my colleagues, it was easier to find the essential factors to concentrate on and, also, to catch the weaknesses related to content marketing creation and business.

In regard to the companies interviewed, the rating of top professionals also applies: they all know their marketing and communications, they work very hard to constantly reach large audiences and they all seriously either conduct or consider conducting content marketing, thus carefully following the development of the field. Their marketing views and operations can be said to give valuable input on the current status of content marketing as part of the Finnish marketing communications scene.

The interviews with my colleagues somewhat surprised me; instead of somebody I know well, an expert of her or his own field appeared sitting in front of me, very factually and very business-like. I heard an analysed, strategically broad outlook on the topic and learned a lot when looking at my colleague's field from a bird's-eye view instead of that of the daily operations. My colleagues took me and my thesis work seriously, which I am very thankful for.

The situation was the same on the corporate side; I faced very matter-of-fact, serious attitudes towards my work despite the fact that all these people probably would have had other things to do. With the people I knew beforehand, the discussion was easily kept on the theme interview questions during the interview.

Altogether, the interviews with these two groups gave me the very best expertise on the matters I wanted to research, and I received very proper data.

As my thesis does not seek to value or grade content marketing operations by either the interviewed companies or A-lehdet, I will not need to worry about presenting negative comments or views on any party, either. My research will not take sides but it will simply illustrate the current status of content marketing both from the corporates' and practitioners' sides, seeking their views on success factors of content marketing. Despite this, my background and starting point as a researcher in this study are essential to be recognised and to be aware of when reading and interpreting my work.



## **2. Theoretical framework – what is content marketing**

### **2.1 Different approaches to content marketing**

Defining content marketing has been challenging as its meaning changes depending on the context.

As is almost boringly repeated, the literature always mentions John Deere's Furrow Magazine as the roots of content marketing (Garnider 2013). Of course, his heritage is remarkable; in 1895, the founder of this farming equipment company, John Deere, saw a need to teach farmers best practices in farming, and chose to do it by starting a magazine. The Furrow Magazine was a huge success, and still is. It's now the largest circulated farming magazine in the world, delivered monthly to approximately 1.5 million farmers in 12 to 40 different countries in print and on the web (John Deere Furrow).

The Furrow can be seen as a model for today's content marketing as its content was informative but engaging, and it was meant to build passionate brand loyalty with John Deere. In today's light, however, Deere's legacy can be seen more as custom publishing as it refers to a process-like act of producing content, usually by outsourcing the production to a third party by an organisation. The term was created by media companies that were looking for a way to differentiate their publishing business from that of the companies' or organisations' ways of publishing content. (Pulizzi 2013)

The next name that one can't – and doesn't need to – avoid in content marketing discussion is Joe Pulizzi, the widely-known practitioner and professional influencer in the field and the founder of the Content Marketing Institute (CMI). Pulizzi defines the Content Marketing Institute as the global content marketing education and training organisation concentrated on multichannel storytelling.

Pulizzi himself refers to the year 2001 as a turning point in perception of the practice as it was "easy to see that effective marketing was starting to look more and more like publishing" (Pulizzi 2013, 2–3). Large brands saw great results creating their own content, similar to what media companies did, and advertising spending was not the only way to market any more. This is when Pulizzi says that he started to slip the phrase 'content marketing' into discussion, and he now defines it like this: "Content marketing is the marketing and business process for creating and distributing valuable and compelling

content to attract, acquire, and engage a clearly defined and understood target audience – with the objective of driving profitable customer action.” (Pulizzi 2013, 5)

The essence of the definition is the direct linkage to business performance and delivery of business in one form or another. Content as such is not enough but it must do something for the business – inform, engage or amuse with the objective of causing customers to act profitably (Pulizzi 2013, 10).

When the buyers get consistent, valuable information from a company, they reward the seller with business and loyalty at the end. Good content marketing causes action; it makes a reader stop, think, and behave differently than she or he would have done without the content.

In his definition, Pulizzi incorporates all elements of today’s content marketing elements; audience recognition and targeting, content that is focused on creation of a valuable experience and ultimately able to reach to the stage of storytelling (2.1.2 2.1.2 ) that is needed for an effective marketing impact.

### **2.1.1 Companies are publishers**

Pulizzi’s own perception on content marketing has clearly developed towards a more marketing and business-oriented view over time. In 2009, Pulizzi and Barret (2009, 8) still defined content marketing as “the creation and distribution of educational and/or compelling content in multiple formats to attract and/or retain customers.” In 2011, Rose and Pulizzi stated (2011, 12) that content marketing is “a strategy focused on the creation of a valuable experience”.

Gradually, the notion of measurable business benefits has become more prominent, together with the view that brands are not just marketers but that they are publishers (Pulizzi 2012, 117), conveying their authentic brand stories to carefully chosen target groups.

This description immediately calls for further perception on at least two concepts: the publishers and the stories.

Regarding the publishing part, we have come so far that people are starting to ask – as, for example, Elizabeth Spayd (2014) in her headline in Columbia Journalism Review – “Who cares who is the journalist?”

The audience does not seem to care, Spayd notes.

*“Coke – and Nestlé and Chipotle and Volkswagen and countless other companies – have blown up their marketing departments in recent years. They’ve infused them with something that looks closer to a newsroom, producing glossy magazines, blog networks, reported articles, long-form narratives, and compelling videos. -- Or check out a site produced by Red Bull on surfing: It’s filled with spectacular photography, short documentaries, the latest news on surfing, and very little about Red Bull energy drinks. -- They’re capable of masterful storytelling. And they’ve made both an art and science of connecting with their audiences.” – Spayd 2014*

According to Pulizzi, content professionals are important in today’s companies (Pulizzi 2013, 22). Many companies have for some time already – also in Finland – been hiring journalists into the service of content planning and production, and many are now in the process of building dedicated content marketing entities including journalistic knowhow. As a journalistic work process, this has been seen as containing the concept of the larger entity of ‘media work’ introduced by Mark Deuze already in 2007. In his view, professionals involved in media work cover a broad area of work in the media industry including not just journalistic content creation but also such tasks as concept development, content production, content work on online channels, and marketing and communication with audiences. These tasks advance the success of media products and services and acknowledge larger collaboration with marketers.

The word storytelling is often present in journalism discussion. A definition of storytelling, however, seems to be more difficult to find.

Storytelling is sometimes seen as covering everything done in media (Bryan 2017) as the job of journalists is to understand and explain the world to readers in the form of stories. More generally, though, storytelling is separated from news or mere mediation of facts where news or facts are seen as content that is lacking any emotional content. A story, hence, is a sequence of content anchored on a problem, which engages its audience with emotion and meaning (Bryan 2017, 13).

As today’s content marketing speaks a lot about digital storytelling – in addition to all those stories a brand can tell on paper or face-to-face, for example – it is useful, and interesting,

to look at some of the very practical examples Bryan (2017, 3) presents on digital storytelling in action:

- A very short story about growing food, made out of remixed archival photographs
- A podcast about medieval history, where each instalment takes listeners through the extraordinary lives of Norman rulers
- A virtual reality environment where we follow workers ascending a dizzying height
- A blog novel about America in 1968, following two teenagers as they travel through political and personal landscapes
- An account of an alien invasion delivered through multiple Twitter accounts; an updated War of the Worlds hoax, tweet by tweet
- A video clip about a mother–daughter relationship over time
- A game of sorts seemingly about The Matrix, based on a website, but mysteriously extending across multiple platforms, including your e-mail inbox
- Hundreds of Vermont’s teenagers creating multimedia stories for each other.

Content marketing’s understanding of storytelling involves the basic hypothesis that companies are as capable in engaging audiences via storytelling as are the media. In Pulizzi’s view (2012, 117), the content creation activities in both these types of companies are generally the same. Thus, non-media brands are competing with traditional media for attention and retention, and, according to Pulizzi, the audience is also ready to accept content created by a brand. This was at least partially backed in a study by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University (2015), for example, which found acceptance among British and American readers for sponsored content outside core news especially – in areas such as travel, food, fashion and entertainment. Also, if readers of online news know up-front that a brand may have influenced the content, they are more accepting – in contrast to the finding in the same study that more than a third of readers said that they have felt “disappointed or deceived” after reading an article that turned out to be paid for by an advertiser.

What is the difference, then, between content marketing’s stories and journalistic stories? It is not so much in how the story is reported but in why it was commissioned and who owns it. Wuebben (2012, 5) expresses the meaning of content marketing’s storytelling as a story of a brand’s product or service that “propels your brand into the hearts and minds of your prospect, customers and others”. Content marketing is bought and paid for by companies in order to meet business objectives whereas journalism explicitly promises to serve the interests of its audiences and its community first (Basen 2012).

The risk of blending journalistic and non-journalistic content has raised concern among professionals and the public also. Generally speaking, content marketers do not have any intention to mislead readers; they appeal to transparency as the sender of content is made visible in connection with it (with the help of logos or special markings citing the commercial content), making it possible for recipients to draw their own conclusions about the credibility of the content. As this matter is an extensive and important discussion of its own, it will not be separately handled in my thesis. That said, my study considers content marketing's storytelling as any content that is able to evoke feelings, engagement or action by readers.

If thus agreed that content creation activities in both media and companies are generally the same, only one thing separates the two: how money comes in (Pulizzi 2012, 117). A media company makes money directly through paid content sales or advertising sales, but a non-media company gets its money from content indirectly by attracting and retaining customers that, in turn, bring business benefits.

### **2.1.2 Content as a tool in generating sales**

Pulizzi (2013, 70–74) further elaborates the concept of storytelling. In his content marketing maturity model, storytelling is the ultimate, or third, stage where the brand integrates content into a larger brand narrative and aligns its content strategy completely around a customer engagement strategy.

In the first stage, the company is content aware; creating content is part of the company's inbound marketing. The strategy consists of generating lots of trustworthy and helpful content in order to be found, generate awareness, and engender trust with target audiences. The second stage, the thought leader, means that the brand creates content that delivers value beyond the scope of the brand's product or service. The business moves into creating content – instead of just for its core buyer personas – for influencers.

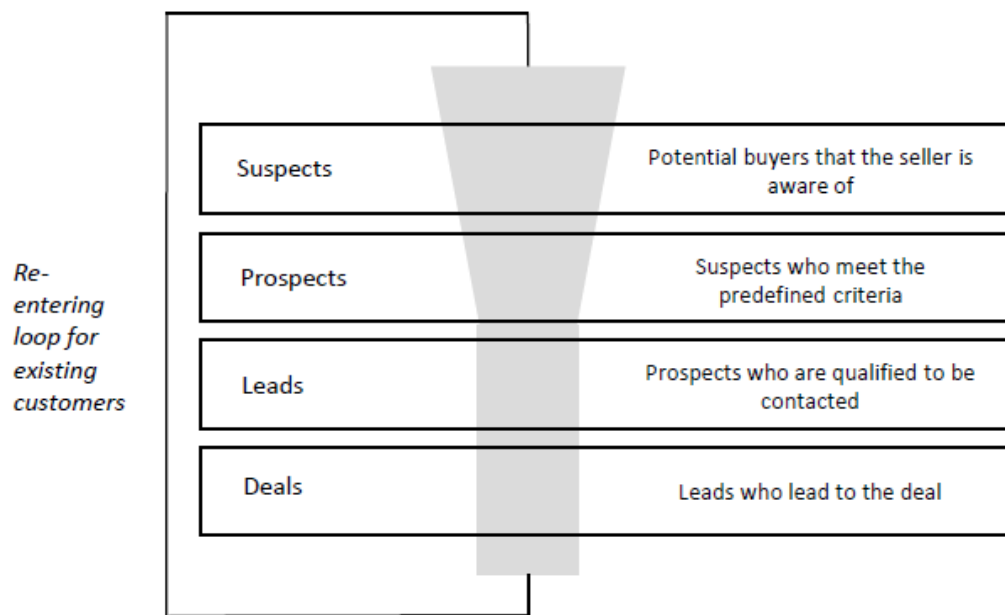
The third stage, a storyteller, draws prospects, customers, and influencers into an emotional relationship with the brand. The storyteller educates, entertains, engages, and has impact on audiences because the content goes well beyond the scope of the product or service into why the organisation exists at all. This is illustrated by the example of Red Bull, for instance,

which understands it is not just about an energy drink but it is about building the aspirational story that comes along with that drink. (Pulizzi 2013, 71–73)

The power of storytelling as means of improving a company's business benefits is based on the power of engagement. Brands use storytelling to be found in the web's search engines, to get sales leads, and to participate in social media; those helpful, valuable stories position them as trusted experts in their fields, and, if the content is worthy, it converts casual readers into loyal readers. The loyal reader may then be converted into loyal customers. (Pulizzi 2013, 26)

Pulizzi illustrates the process of loyalisation by the term engagement cycle (2013, 105) where the customer first just searches for information or becomes aware of a certain topic, product or service. Secondly, she or he moves further to searching for information, then to a comparison, and, finally, to a decision on a purchase – or an adoption of an idea. The time between different phases may be minutes, or it could be months, and the consumer may also alternate between the phases or skip part of them.

Järvinen and Taiminen (2016, 166), for example, have developed this idea further in relation to a company's sales process, or lead generation process. Their sales funnel framework (see Figure 1, page 15) illustrates the narrowing of a company's customer base from all potential customers who may be interested in the company's products and services to those customers who actually purchase something. In other words, the sales funnel classifies potential customers based on their purchasing stage.



**Figure 1.** Sales funnel framework. The framework presents different phases where a customer can be reached with content in her/his purchase process by a company. (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016)

Järvinen and Taiminen's (2016) framework illustrates a new marketing philosophy called 'data-driven content marketing' where a company is creating and delivering valuable content based on individual customer needs. The purpose of this action is to generate high-quality sales leads.

The procedure demands application of marketing automation software which makes it possible for a company to target customers with the right content at the right time.

In the first stage, a new reader is identified upon leaving contact information on the company website (or, e.g., at a seminar) as part of a sales inquiry, or a contact request, for example. Also, existing customers who visit the website are automatically identified by the marketing automation software through an IP address, cookies, an e-mail address or a website login.

In the second stage, the company intends to transform these content, or marketing, leads into sales leads. This is done with the help of personalisation in communications by simple things such as greeting the reader by name and using her or his local language. It is more

and more important to predict what kinds of content she or he is likely to be interested in and, then, deliver relevant content with which to encourage the reader to make a purchase decision.

When these readers, or marketing leads, have become sales leads, the sales leads are automatically transferred to the company's customer relations management system (CRM). CRM enables companies to manage relationships and data associated with them. The CRM system divides the leads into lead queues which the company's sales department then reviews and contacts, making the leads (the interested readers) a sales opportunity. In the last phases, the company begins sales negotiations with the reader, with an attempt to close a purchase.

Järvinen and Taiminen's study shows how the creation and delivery of valuable content can be integrated with selling processes with the help of marketing automation. For a content creator, behavioural targeting and content personalisation are the keys in this model. This study was examined in a BtoB context but, according to Järvinen and Taiminen, the same principles of combining content marketing and marketing automation presumably apply to BtoC cases as well.

### **2.1.3 Reader engagement takes place in social media**

The discussion on the different phases of a customer journey in content marketing is important as a company needs to, in order to generate business benefits, provide the right kind of content for the right decision points so that engagement with audience is possible and promoted and that it leads to a conversion, or an action by a reader. A conversion means that the reader reacts to the content in one way or another; she or he likes, comments, or shares a company's Facebook post, calls the company, orders its product etc.

The concept of engagement includes the idea of two-way communication between a company and an audience. This today mainly happens in 'earned media', in other words, in social media channels. As content marketing mostly takes place in these digital channels, some scholars have renamed it Digital Content Marketing, or DCM (Hollebeek & Macky 2019, 27). Their definition includes the same essence as Pulizzi's: Contrary to advertising that is designed to persuade consumers to purchase offerings, Digital Content Marketing



focuses on increasing potential customers' appreciation of the brand or a company by adding value to their lives, such as by educating them, for example.

As content is available and present in digital channels, consumers are able to consume, generate and share it on social media platforms, blogs, and photo and video sharing communities. The engagement around social media content, then, resembles that of participation in brand communities. Consumers join brand communities as they want to identify themselves with the brand and as they want to be identified by others in the same community. Being part of a community enhances feelings of community, which, in turn, increases brand loyalty. (Laroche et al. 2012). Companies therefore strategically nurture relations with the brand community. Similarly, nurturing conversations on content sent by the brand is a relevant part of successful content marketing strategy.

This engagement and constant opportunity for consumers to be proactive and active in the online world is still rather new for companies, and not all of them are sufficiently prepared for the fact that messages are not entirely in their control. Daugherty, Eastin, and Bright (2008, 16) even argue that these 'niche markets', in other words, brands functioning as publishers, are driven less by the publishers and more by user-generated content, sometimes also called electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Muntinga, Moorman and Smit 2011, 16). Consumer activity, user-generated content and word-of-mouth are important when judging the effectiveness of content marketing at the end and, therefore, they are relevant concepts in regard to my research question ('How to make good content marketing').

The capability of serving the engagement and/or sales funnel demands a definition of common objectives for content across all company functions. This implies that content marketing should have an acknowledged status in relation to the communications, marketing, and sales functions of the company, at least. In practice, most companies have not (yet) connected their content marketing decisions and operations seamlessly as part of their marketing communications operations. The exact field of operation and organisational location of content marketing actions inside a company tends to be mostly unsolved.

This may be partly because the nature of content marketing makes it difficult to decide whether it is marketing, or whether it is more a part of communications – and at least partly sales. Content marketing includes a company sending messages and making its voice heard

to its target groups – an action resembling marketing. However, content marketing messages are receiver-centred, not company-centred; they are planned to provide the receiver experiences, emotions and benefits instead of feeding her or him directly with the company's products or services. This process can be defined as inbound marketing – in comparison to outbound, or traditional marketing – that refers to pulling customers to the company's products and services by offering useful information and resources instead of direct purchase offers, or advertising. (Halligan and Shah, 2010)

Another challenge in placing content marketing within the corporate functions stems from the problem of differentiation and separation of marketing and communications. As they are increasingly more difficult to differ from each other in general because their objectives are same to a substantive point (Malmelin and Hakala 2005, 12–13), this is even more true in the case of content marketing. According to Joe Pulizzi (2013), however, we are seeing an evolution of the marketing department transforming itself into more of a publishing department – thus including content marketing operations – as content marketing and storytelling become a larger part of the marketing organisation in general.

## **2.2 Framework for considering aspects of content marketing**

It is clear that content marketing is a wide set of strategic thinking, cooperation between a company's business functions, brand building and audience engagement, platform choices, and practical content and analysis work, as discussed above. The interconnectivity of different elements is clearly present in a framework presented by Charmaine du Plessis<sup>1</sup> (2015a and 2015b). Her analysis incorporates elements of content marketing from different theories, acknowledging complexities of the content marketing process and noting that they should be carefully managed. Therefore, it is beneficial to broaden the understanding of the concepts on content marketing with the help of her framework. du Plessis defines content marketing like this: "Content marketing is a strategic brand storytelling technique aimed at changing consumers' inactive behavior through unobtrusive, engaging brand conversations in earned media" (du Plessis 2015a, 128).

du Plessis's view starts from the attention that marketers are increasingly turning towards content marketing to replace interruptive advertising and to attract more attention to their

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<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Department of Communication Science, University of South Africa

brand. With content marketing, the target audience is influenced in a tactful way by pulling them to the brand content which should be useful, relevant, interesting, sharable, free, visually appealing and linked to brand stories to add value to the lives of the audience (du Plessis 2015a, 123). Users engage with the content – and the brand – mainly on social media by sharing, mentioning, commenting, clicking links, and liking. This sharing of brand stories, du Plessis states, could connect consumers with the brand on a deeper emotional level.

Social conversations and word of mouth show engagement by users with the content and the brand. Therefore, the company should strategically identify valuable brand content that could be created and shared through stories, for example, blog posts, infographics, eBooks, whitepapers, videos, podcasts, case studies, webinars, press releases, interviews and testimonials (du Plessis 2015a, 124). The brand content is also optimised to boost search rankings by using search engine optimisation (SEO) for more organic search engine traffic.

In her analysis, du Plessis identified six essential elements that should be managed and implemented in content marketing. The elements can be seen from a very practical point of view, as defining what a sender of content marketing messages needs to take into account when planning and conducting content marketing operations so that they will be successful. The elements are; medium element, strategic element, formation element, intrinsic element, communication element, and corollary element. Table 1 below (page 20) presents the elements.

Main elements	Theme	Example phrases
Medium element	The nature of the platform for the content	“interactive platform” “social media” “earned media”
Strategic element	Strategic approach to develop the content	“a strategic marketing approach” “consistent, integrated and continuous” “promoting brand, brand values or products”
Formation element	The construction of the content	“constructs good stories” “circulates stories that are directly tied to a product or organisational brand” “narrative, storytelling approach”
Intrinsic element	Natural occurrence of the content	“starts conversations” “conversations online” “cultural conversation”
Communication element	The technique(s) used to convey the content	“to educate, inform or entertain customers or prospective customers by creating attention” “the emotional engagement”
Corollary element	The anticipated outcome of the content	“consumers serve as creators and disseminators of branded content” “people will want to consume and share it”

**Table 1.** The main elements identified for the term “content marketing” by Charmaine du Plessis. The framework presents six essential elements that a company should consider when managing and conducting content marketing operations. (du Plessis 2015a)

The elements were formed in an inductive thematic analysis process by du Plessis. The analysis aimed at identifying specific patterns within a data set to accurately reflect the entire scope of content marketing. This included gathering definitions and explanations of what content marketing is, and what it constitutes from articles and web pages during the period 2009 to 2014, and also with practitioners' own definitions. In the process, du Plessis found 55 suitable data items, which she then converted into electronic text format to make them ready for analysis. In order to be selected for the data set, the definitions and explanations needed to refer to creating and sharing of content in an online environment to enhance awareness about the company, its products or services or its brand.

du Plessis then analysed the definitions as a thematic inductive analysis using qualitative computer software, and produced a list of the most frequent words in the data set as well as its associated words. The most frequent words were: publishing, consumers, brand, media, information, storytelling, valuable, relevant, strategy, and consistent.

These words and their associated words were used to categorise the main themes regarding the content marketing field.

The themes recognised were – as presented in Figure 2. above – the nature of the platform of the content, strategic approach to develop the content, the construction of the content, natural occurrence of the content, the technique(s) used to convey the content and the anticipated outcome of the content. (du Plessis 2015a)

As the framework, in practice, offers a tool for content marketing practitioners for their decisions and production, it is a useful frame of reference in my examination of prerequisites for good content marketing.

### 3. Research question

I have above described diverse theories and angles of view on content marketing that observe the art of content marketing from the senders' or the practitioners' side. These are combined in the framework presented by Charmaine du Plessis, and as her framework – with its holistic, yet practical stance – provides a wide enough base to examine managing content marketing, it is most useful framework for a base of analysis in my research.

Specifically, I can now specify the objective of my research as follows:

As content marketing is a rather new concept in both media and corporate business fields, its boundaries and functions are still under development and partly undefined. At the same time, content marketing is used more and more by companies, many times more successfully than traditional marketing, in interaction with their audiences. Therefore, there is need for further elaboration of the field. This study concentrates on:

- Defining today's content marketing, and
- Analysing what are the prerequisites for creating successful content marketing

Is successful content marketing based on the art of storytelling? Is it the skill of mastering audiences, creating communities? Does the content still matter, and how much?

The research problem of this study can be solved by answering the following question:

*What characterises the creation process of good content marketing?*

In this study, the word 'company' refers to a company, a (non-commercial) organisation or another entity that is sending content to its customers, potential customers or other audiences. The 'company' can alternatively be replaced by the words 'brand', 'sender', or 'practitioner'.

The word 'customer' in this thesis mainly refers to recipients of the content sent by companies. When discussing the content marketing operations of A-lehdet, the word 'customer' can also relate to an entity (i.e. a company) that purchases content marketing operations from A-lehdet. In case of a potential misunderstanding, the distinction of the two uses of the word is made clear in the context.

## **4. Data and methods**

### **4.1 Choice of the data collecting method**

The research question could be studied in several ways. In addition to collecting answers from previous research projects and literature, the topic could be investigated, for example, via studying the elements of successful content marketing cases or analysing questionnaire answers of companies or professionals in charge of content marketing.

Because I was interested in customers' authentic comments, thoughts, and experiences the most, I preferred the idea of conducting personal interviews with them. I wanted to hear what is the importance of content marketing in their marketing communications, and how do they see it is possible to produce successful content marketing.

Also, as I find that high expertise in content marketing and ideas for its development mostly lie with professionals, I thought it would be useful and interesting to discuss with the doers in the field.

I learned that, among research methods, a half-structured interview (see e.g. Eskola and Suoranta 1998, Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2007), also called a theme interview, would give the interviewees room to answer the questions – that are identical for all the respondents – with their own words. A half-structured interview defines the interview themes beforehand but leaves room for focused further questions and gathering of additional information when relevant. I found this important especially given the still vague definition of content marketing. Collecting descriptions of examples was also simpler via theme interviews, which supported the decision to select this data collecting method. I thus decided to use theme interviews as my data collecting method.

Sequentially, finding results from research data demands an analysis of the data collected.

In my case, qualitative content analysis seemed the right analysis method for the research.

Qualitative content analysis examines the data by categorising, in other words, by looking for similarities and differences in it and then summarising the findings. Content analysis aims at forming a sharp, focused description that ties the results into a broader context and together with previous research results (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2002, 105). Qualitative analysis can be based on the collected data itself, or it can be based on a pre-existent theory. In my

research, I decided to base the analysis on Charmaine du Plessis's framework that I presented in Chapter 2.2 and which I will further elaborate in Chapter 5.

As I work at A-lehdet Oy and in its Content Studio, I knew how ambitiously content marketing expertise is nurtured there. A lot of the development discussed on the international content marketing field is visible to me at A-lehdet; the view, for example, that interesting content and A-lehdet's journalistic skills would be beneficial in a wider use by corporate customers. Also, the exploitation of data, analytics and other growth hacking methods as part of the content marketing process are A-lehdet's core expertise, as is the belief in and pursuit of new innovative ways in journalistic narrative directed to the youth especially, and the consistent development of native advertising and influencer content and business. Therefore, the experts in these fields would be well qualified to give me reasoning for good content marketing.

In daily content marketing work, one of the most important points of cooperation is to find a solution that is the best both professionally and from the customer's perspective. Therefore, I thought hearing both parties would be, firstly, extremely interesting, and, secondly, beneficial, as the parallel examination of the two sets of the interviews could produce some aspects for further development – for both sides. I therefore chose the other group of interviewees to be companies that A-lehdet already works with in the area of content marketing or media sales or that could be of interest as future customers for A-lehdet.

I am presenting the companies and people chosen for the interviews in Chapter 4.3.

I started my work with an extensive review of articles, books and other written material on the topic, examining what content marketing is and how it and its concept have developed during the past few years. As interest in content marketing as an area of research has increased in the same phase with its usage, the array of starting points, views, and researchers is wide. Based on my review, I chose a few from the plenty that I found relevant and academically convincing in the light of my research question. This theoretical background was depicted in Chapter 2.



## 4.2 This is A-lehdet Oy

Practically all Finns know the name A-lehdet; A-lehdet is a Finnish media company with its roots in magazine publishing already since the 1930s. A-lehdet describes itself as a 'storyteller', and this argument has its roots way back in the history, in its own birth story. In 1933, Aune and Yrjö Lyytikäinen, the ancestors of the owning family of A-lehdet, started producing and selling the magazine called Apu (Help). The magazine cost two Finnish marks, of which Aune and Yrjö gave part to the unemployed in Finland.

This heritage is still cherished at A-lehdet, but within the fundamental change of the media industry the company has consistently developed its strategy, and is now seeking growth from several new paths. The A-lehdet Group of today comprises the parent company A-lehdet Oy and its subsidiaries: Finnish Design Shop Oy (ownership 80%), Finland's biggest online retailer for design products, and Oma Terveys Oy (ownership 80%) and Hyvinvoinnin Tavaratalo Oy (Oma Terveys owns 47%), which offer wellness and health services. A-lehdet is also a minority shareholder in the growth marketing company Genero Oy (ownership 49%).

A-lehdet consists of three business entities: media business, growth marketing and digital design. Its media business includes four business areas; Living, Health and wellbeing, Topical media, and Youth media, with some of the well-known media brands being, for example, Apu, Avotakka, Eeva, Image, Kotivinkki, Trendi, Unelmien Talo ja Koti, Image, meilläkotona.fi, lily.fi, and demi.fi. A-lehdet's internal Gen Z start-up concentrates on creating new kinds of media and storytelling solutions starting from the youth as a target group. The separate business area of health is seeking new openings in the area of healthcare and well-being.

A-lehdet's net sales were 102.5 million euros in 2017, and it has 500 employees ([www.a-lehdet.fi](http://www.a-lehdet.fi)). Consumer business makes approximately 60% of A-lehdet's revenue, and corporate customers as well as online business together approximately 40%.

BtoB customers are served in A-lehdet's BtoB organisation, which includes Content Studio with its native advertising and influencer marketing activities, plus media sales services.

Content Studio – which, as its name suggests, concentrates on content marketing – has its roots in producing customer magazines for decades already, but, in addition to still

producing a few of Finland's most prominent customer print magazines, it today builds strategic partnerships with a variety of BtoB companies, providing them with brand and content strategies, SEO strategies, and multichannel content marketing solutions.

The renowned customer of A-lehdet Content Studio is Pirkka Media, the media wing of the Finnish retail group K Group. The Pirkka magazine and different digital contents of [pirkka.fi](http://pirkka.fi) and [k-ruoka.fi](http://k-ruoka.fi) reach millions of Finns on the web and social media channels in all content forms.

For the biggest financial group in Finland, OP, Content Studio produces digital content material for OP's own media platform, [op.media](http://op.media), as well as for OP's print magazines. [op.media](http://op.media)'s objective is to serve Finns with beneficial content for their everyday life, and thus the site's topics vary considerably from daily tips to personal interviews, naturally also up to financial views and practical finance advice.

For Avainapteekit Group, Content Studio is responsible for producing the Avainapteekit magazine that is tailored in more than 150 versions to individually serve the group's pharmacies. Digital contents as well as promotional materials for the Avainapteekit pharmacies, for example, are produced in the same process.

A few other companies that Content Studio serves are e.g. Aikakausmedia, City of Helsinki, Helen Oy, Destia Oyj, Kotkamills Group Oyj, Suomen Rengaskierrätys Oy, Suomen Syöpäyhdistys, Uniarts Helsinki (Taideyliopisto), and Valio.

As content does not benefit anyone unless effectively shared, Content Studio's professionals work in close cooperation with Genero, as well as with its native advertising and influencer teammates. A-lehdet sees native advertising – defined by Oxford Dictionary of Marketing as 'paid-for promoted content that matches the style, design, and function of the platform on which it appears' – as one of the important ways to find audience for a company's messages, especially if the content is related to A-lehdet's core media brands and thus has a substantial audience available.

On the influencer side, A-lehdet cooperates with approximately 150 influencers that are either bloggers or vloggers.

In some cases, it is effective to combine content production and advertising processes – for example, when a company is exploiting the same visual material in both content material

and advertisements. Companies frequently seek these types of synergies in their operations today, and Content Studio regularly cooperates with A-lehdet's media sales to find the best solutions for the company's objectives.

### 4.3 Choice of the interviewees

The choice of research interviewees was the next step in my research work. From the companies' side, I used a list of potentially interesting customers for A-lehdet's Content Studio plus its existing customer list as my starting point. I chose representatives of the two important areas of A-lehdet – Living, and Health & wellbeing – for my potential interviewees, as cooperation on these areas would be strategically interesting and important for Content Studio's growth.

The third segment in my interviewee contacts, BtoB and/or international companies, is a traditionally relevant group of content marketing clients whose needs are assumed to differ from those of the first two due to, firstly, their BtoB focus of services, and, secondly, the international scope of their operations.

As I would analyse the interview material manually instead of using a computer-assisted coding program or similar, it was important to limit the number of interviews to 5–7 in both sets in order to be able to handle the amount of data. Correspondingly, I assumed this number would already give adequate variety in the material, especially given that all participants would represent either a different company or different company operations (A-lehdet's participants).

My list for the potential interviewee contacts is seen in Table 2.

Related to living	Related to health and well-being	BtoB/international
Artek	Attendo	Kemira
K-Rauta	Mehiläinen	Lassila&Tikanoja
OP	Pfizer	Metsä Group
Sato	Pihlajalinna	SSAB
Skanska	Plusterveys	Valmet
Tikkurila		Vapo
YIT Lemminkäinen		Wärtsilä

**Table 2.** A list of the potential companies for a research interview request.

Of these 19 companies, I chose eight that I personally found most interesting business-wise and content-wise, and I sent them an interview request via email. The companies were K-Rauta, Mehiläinen, OP, SSAB Special Steels, Telia, Vapo, Viking Line plus one additional health company that did not respond to my request.

As all the other companies except one immediately approved my interview request, the list of corporate interviews was set.

The company interviewees and their positions were the following:

- K-Rauta, Outi Gyldén, Content Manager. K-Rauta belongs to K Group's Building and Technical trade division that is a leading operator in its area in Northern Europe, serving both professional builders and consumers. K-Rauta executes a wide range of marketing communications actions and started conducting consistent content marketing in early 2018.
- Mehiläinen, Ove Uljas, Director, Marketing and Business Development. Mehiläinen is a nationwide provider of healthcare services for both personal customers and companies. In addition to a variety of specialist health and well-being services, it today offers dental healthcare, care services, child welfare services, mental health rehabilitation services and outsourced public healthcare services. Mehiläinen applies a variety of content marketing actions.
- OP, Lotta Ala-Kulju, Vice President, External Communications and own media. OP Financial Group is the largest financial services group in Finland, offering banking, non-life insurance and wealth management services. OP's main service point in content marketing is op.media and, in print format, differently segmented OP magazines.
- SSAB Special Steels, Mia Julin, Marketing Director. SSAB Special Steels is the global leader in high-strength steels and is represented in markets in Europe, the Americas, APAC, the Middle East and Africa. Its product portfolio includes a number of unique steels grades of which Hardox steel – the leading wear steel – has the highest awareness. SSAB Special Steels executes content marketing in all of its global regions in various forms.
- Telia, Janne Kaijärvi, Head of Editorial Content. Telia Company offers a large range of telecommunication services in all the Nordic and Baltic countries. The company is headquartered in Stockholm, and each country organisation is responsible for running its own operations under the Telia brand. Telia is a vivid actor in all marketing communications activities, including editorial content marketing.
- Vapo, Ahti Martikainen, Director, Communications and Public Relations. Vapo focuses on growing and recycling, the production of solid fuels, heating, electricity and steam, as well as the provision of various energy solutions. It also develops new products from peat and other natural materials. Vapo produces blogs, other digital material and print magazines for its target groups.
- Viking Line, Kaj Takolander, Vice President, Sales and Marketing. Viking Line offers passenger services, recreation and cargo carrier services on the vessels trafficking on the northern Baltic Sea. Its marketing communications activities include a variety of measures from tactical marketing to various forms of content marketing.

On the A-lehdet side, I wanted to depict the diversity of functions or actors that are necessary when formulating content marketing actions in today's media world. Therefore I chose eight people for an interview, and they all accepted my request.

The A-lehdet interviewees and their positions were the following:

Employees working at A-lehdet Oy's consumer media brands:

- Anna Ruohonen, Director of Media Business. Area of expertise in regard to this study: Journalism, storytelling, knowledge of reader interests, quality of journalism and storytelling.
- Anni Lintula, Director of the special business programme Gen Z. Area of expertise in regard to this study: New forms and platforms of storytelling, young audience.
- Antti Voutilainen, Head of Analytics. Area of expertise in regard to this study: Data-directed content marketing, measurement and analytics.
- Antti Karvanen, Director of Digital Innovations. Area of expertise in regard to this study: Digital innovations and platforms.

Employees working at A-lehdet Oy's Content Studio:

- Sari Mikkonen-Mannila, Director of Content Studio. Area of expertise in regard to this study: Strategy, content creation knowhow, skills and innovations.
- Jessica Leino, Head of Creatives, Art Director. Area of expertise in regard to this study: Content strategies and innovations, content concepts and production.
- Mervi Rantakari, Head of Native Advertising. Area of expertise in regard to this study: Strategies, innovations and production of native advertising solutions. Influencer marketing.

Employee of Genero Oy, A-lehdet's subsidiary specialised in growth hacking

- Sebastian Östman, COO and co-owner. Area of expertise in regard to this study: Growth hacking, i.e. how to find more readers for content.

#### **4.4 The theme interview questions**

My literature investigation on the topic resulted in a general view on the views and theories of interest for the interviews. Based on this survey, as well as on my research question, I was able to formulate theme interview questions.

The questions addressed to the companies' side were slightly different from the questions directed to A-lehdet's employees. In the question set of the companies, the emphasis was on research on their existing content management actions, corporate and other preconditions affecting them, content examples, and the interviewees' predictions of content marketing's development in the near future.

While the same issues were present also in A-lehdet's questions, their set of questions was also intended to shed light on division of work at a modern content marketing provider. The roles of different A-lehdet employees contributing to a content marketing offering provide understanding on the widening scope of the field.

The theme interview questions addressed to the customer side – K-Rauta, Mehiläinen, OP, SSAB, Telia, Vapo, and Viking Line – were the following:

- What is content marketing?
- What is the place and role of content marketing in your company or in your marketing communications palette?
- What are your objectives for content marketing; when has content marketing redeemed its place?
- Please give a few examples of:
  - Successful content marketing in your company – what was decisive for success?
  - Problems/challenges/failure – what caused the challenges? What could have made these cases successful?  
→ In general: what is successful content marketing (or what is it like)?
- What kind of issues does your company need to consider when implementing content marketing, or which issues frame everyday production (such as technologies, targeting, skills and know-how, resources etc.)?
- What does content marketing need to be like in relation to your brand?
- What will characterise content marketing in three years' time? What kind of content marketing would you like to do within three years?

The theme interview questions directed to the A-lehdet side – Antti Karvanen, Jessica Leino, Anni Lintula, Sari Mikkonen-Mannila, Mervi Rantakari, Anna Ruohonen, Antti Voutilainen, and Sebastian Östman (Genero Oy) – were the following:

- What is content marketing?
- What is your role or the role of the function you present in implementation of content marketing? How is it related to the whole?
- What kind of tasks and issues have you handled in content marketing projects and who are the most important cooperation partners in this work?
- Please give a few examples of:
  - Successful content marketing in your company – what was decisive for success?
  - Problems/challenges/failure – what caused the challenges? What could have made these cases successful?  
→ In general: what is successful content marketing (or what is it like)?
- What will be distinctive for content marketing in three years' time? What kind of content marketing would you like to do within three years?

#### **4.5 Conducting the interviews**

Of the 15 interviews, I conducted 13 face-to-face either at the corporates' premises or at A-lehdet. The two remaining interviews – with Sari Mikkonen-Mannila and Sebastian Östman – were conducted by phone.

Most of the interviews lasted 40–60 minutes. As there were four shorter interviews – 13, 17, 31 and 35 minutes – the average length of the interviews landed at 41 minutes. The two shortest discussions were interrupted by sudden work-related matters, and since we had covered the essential I did not see reason to reschedule a continuation.

I recorded all the interviews and then transcribed them word-by-word. Extra utters, filler words or pauses weren't, however, written out in the transcriptions. This was because my analysis method would concentrate on giving meanings to facts, views, ideas, and opinions instead of the way of expressing them or the general sound or tone of voice in the interviews – which may naturally be important in another kind of research.

The interviewees have checked their quotes in the thesis and given permission for using their names in the text.

#### **4.6 The framework for presenting the findings**

Of the different definitions and theories concerning content management, I chose Charmaine du Plessis's (2015a) thematic classification of content management's elements as a classification method of my interview data.

As du Plessis's categorisation, as presented in Chapter 2.2., examines elements that need to be considered when planning and implementing content marketing by a sender – not the reception of content by a receiver or audience – it can be seen as a suitable framework for the initial classification of my interview material. Also, du Plessis's study incorporates elements from different theoretical frameworks of content marketing, recognising the complexities of content marketing processes and, thus, providing a wide enough scope for classification.

Since the interviewee questions were not initially targeted to match the exact categorisation of du Plessis's framework, the matters found in the interview material can be seen as presenting natural input into different themes du Plessis presents – rather than a possible attempt by an interviewee to fulfil a pre-set formula for successful content marketing

formation. This, in turn, is anticipated to give a more authentic view on the issues typical in sender organisations regarding content marketing environment and decisions than direct questions on the themes.

When considering using du Plessis's categorisation as a classification tool for the interview material, I already recognised that not all the matters covered in the interviews would fit in her categories. However, I expected that the issues overrunning her themes would be very valuable for my study as they would help to construct a comprehensive scene of current content marketing and provide a wide enough basis for formulating preconditions for good content marketing for a sender as required in my research question.

Therefore, the starting point for my data analysis was to classify the interview data in line with du Plessis's categories, and then separately analyse the possibly exceeding content.

As an inductive phase of my study (Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2011, 150), I read through the transcribed interviews piece by piece, looking for relevant points, expressions and views related to the themes presented by du Plessis. I then wrote my findings under a suitable category of du Plessis's framework. When finding information that did not belong to any of the categories, I separately documented that.

As a result, I had a large matrix containing references to every point of the framework, plus extra points besides it. With the help of this document, I formed a general view on every category. With the remainder, I started looking for similarities or connecting themes between different respondents and grouped the similarities into logical sub-entities.

The coding, or classification, of data, in my case, was thus based on a working theory method (Eskola and Suoranta, 1998) where du Plessis's theory acted as my working theory.

The results of my coding work can be seen in Chapter 5.



## 5. What did I learn? – Findings and results

### 5.1 Medium element: Platforms are not the first must

In du Plessis's categorisation, the medium element theme refers to careful consideration of the different platforms to be used to create and share content. In her research, this theme was found in reference to the platforms' interactivity, functionality as well as self-publishing abilities.

Today, the platforms in use for content marketing are numerous, and they are constantly evolving and changing. Having its roots in printed publications, content marketing's content is still published in print: as magazines and sales leaflets, for example. It also leverages all other story channels – print, online, in-person, mobile, social (Pulizzi 2013, 5).

Pulizzi suggests that the centre, or the content hub, of all content marketing needs to be owned by a sender. He refers to the 'hub-and-spoke-model' in which the hub – a company blog or website – becomes the centre of the content marketing universe, and the spokes – such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn – are places to syndicate the content. (Pulizzi 2013, 215–216)

That said, in daily content work, the choices of content publication platforms from, for example, technological and visibility point on views are frequent as different solutions typically support different content formats or enable different work practices, such as more advanced automation, flexible moderation or cross-publishing between different social media platforms.

Although general discussion and information concerning possible platforms are vivid, the publishing platform as such was not a starting point for any of my interviewees for their content marketing decisions.

Of the six companies, two mentioned the company's web pages as a platform that had either needed consideration (OP) in regard to their content marketing publishing or as an important centre for customer service (Mehiläinen).

In OP's case, the choice of the publishing platform for the finance company's articles and other customer content was made by recognising that the bank's main service point, the online bank page [www.op.fi](http://www.op.fi), is under such strict data security that administering a content

hub there would be practically complicated. OP told that it therefore decided to launch a separate, site op.media <sup>2</sup>, as its content hub in 2017 when creating its new content centre.

For Mehiläinen, the case is different as [www.mehilainen.fi](http://www.mehilainen.fi) is the focal point for all business at the company as it serves both as the platform for health-related information and as a contact and appointment centre for Mehiläinen's doctors, nurses and other experts.

*"For Mehiläinen, the web pages are a very important channel to produce content on and to activate visitors forward to our services. We have approximately one million unique visitors a month, and users that come to our site are serious – in other words, they look for information or want to book an appointment. Therefore, we do invest in our web pages; they are fast, dynamic, and it's easy to find help there." – Mehiläinen, Uljas*

In contrast to the word 'platform', the word 'channel' was mentioned in almost every interview. There was no company that would not use social media channels for spreading its content and engaging its audiences. Social media seemed to be an almost always-existed platform for all my BtoC, or business-to-consumers, companies – K-Rauta, Mehiläinen, OP, Telia, and Viking Line.

*"We make an enormous number of deals via social media as we build content and posts according to segments we have bought. We constantly refine more accurate segments." – Viking Line, Takolander*

*"Instagram, Twitter, Facebook – they are naturally all our channels." – Mehiläinen, Uljas*

Somewhat differently from the BtoC group, the BtoB, or business-to-business, actor SSAB Special Steels mentioned that it had started social media marketing only a couple of years ago.

*"With social media we are able to reach by far the most customers and end users than with any other media. In marketing, we have recently worked very hard with social media, and have approximately 15 channels in use now. All our major product brands practically have all social media channels in their use which means that there are truly a large number of channels in use. We also have large numbers of followers, for example in (the special steels brand) Hardox, where we've seen truly great success. We therefore want to produce content that works in social media." – SSAB, Julin*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://op.media/>

All these platforms, or channels, came into discussion only after the companies had described their actions for reaching the people desired. Reaching target groups requires knowledge of the channels they use and want to use.

*“We analyse what the channel is where welding engineers typically buzz – it might be Facebook, LinkedIn or a special group, or even a welding magazine – and then we decide the channel we use.” – SSAB, Julin*

*“We need to find the channels where young people are. Even though the content was great, it will not work unless we are in the right channels and speak their language.” – Mehiläinen, Uljas*

The interview material thus indicates that despite technological preconditions and specific characteristics related to all platform and channel decisions, the platform itself is never the first choice in content creation decisions of content senders. It therefore seems that even though the platform or channel has relevance in content marketing processes, this point should not be placed first in the listing of matters to be considered.

Social media channels are, at least in today’s media scene and consumer behaviour, an inevitable way for making readers find the content and get into engagement with the brand. Choosing the right channels for the right content and right target groups thus is a prerequisite for good content marketing.

On A-lehdet’s side, the concept of ‘platform’ came into discussion as part of the recently finalised technological platform renewal project [www.lily.fi](http://www.lily.fi). The site is A-lehdet’s brand medium Lily, targeted at young women. The former Drupal-based Lily platform was replaced by the more modern and popular WordPress blog platform in March.

*“We wanted to create as good platforms for companies’ media and native advertising contents as for bloggers and vloggers. The new lily.fi includes premium solutions for brands for display ads and other solutions.” – A-lehdet, Karvanen*

According to Karvanen, the new lily.fi enables easy embedding of videos and podcasts as well as pre-moderation of reader comments. These types of characteristics are needed in today’s content marketing world where also influencers are a more and more prominent part of content marketing processes.

The renewal of lily.fi is an example of the fact that even technical characteristics of a content hub or channel need to enable and support the modern ways of reaching out to readers.

## 5.2 Strategic element: Thinking must be clear

du Plessis's strategic theme refers to the strategic approach that should be followed in an organisation's content creation. According to Joe Pulizzi, the strategy issue is the most important matter in an organisation's content marketing creation, and he is calling after documented content marketing strategies for companies. A clear "why" for business objectives is essential. (Pulizzi 2014)

This view is shared among other content marketing scholars; for example, in her study, Vinerean (2017, 97) 'offers further insights into the challenges associated with developing an effective content marketing strategy'. She sees the most important challenge in the change in marketing paradigm from online selling online into supporting and helping consumers in online settings, by nurturing each relationship with consumers for long-term success with content marketing tactics.

My theme interviews did not include a direct question on content strategy, which means that all the companies interviewed might well have a documented content strategy. However, two companies mentioned content strategy as a word without a specific question on the matter.

At K-Rauta, the role of content marketing is defined as part of marketing communications strategy that consists of three levels: the strategic level, continuous level and tactical level. The marketing communications strategy, in turn, takes its lead from the strategy of Building and Technical Trade, which, again, underlies the K-Rauta Group strategy.

*"I think we have done the strategy work very well at K-Rauta, and as a content manager, I follow our content strategy, as well as our brand strategy in our operational content work." – K-Rauta, Gyldén*

The strategic level of marketing communications concentrates on strengthening K-Rauta's competition advantage via focusing on brand and imago-related marketing communications contents and actions. The continuous level includes daily content that is intended to inspire, help and encourage people in their construction and home improvement projects. The tactical level consists of what is more seen as traditional marketing: product advertisements, digital banners, sales campaigns etc.

K-Rauta's Gyldén says that the detailed strategic and brand work at K-Rauta group makes the content work clear as its objectives are commonly defined for the whole group, and there is thus no need for so-called 'internal selling' of the idea of content marketing.

OP also told that they are constructing holistic content strategy for op.media.

*"We established op.media in 2017 with a content concept that was intended for acquiring readers and producing enough content to make the audience interested. Now we are in the process of taking content funnels forward so that we could systematically make content for different phases of the funnel." – OP, Ala-Kulju*

OP specifically mentioned that, due to converging interests, content marketing is such an area where it's difficult to locate marketing and communications functions in separate silos, and this in itself gives one reason to seek integration of these two.

*"We at the communications have the ownership of op.media, but our people in businesses and marketing are strongly committed to it and share the understanding of the kind of content that should be produced for the inspiration phase. Further down in the funnel, when customers are transferring from op.media to the main site op.fi, the role of the marketing function increases with the implementation of e.g. retargeting, banners and newsletters." – OP, Ala-Kulju*

As an example of a content theme extending across different operation of the group and the whole sales funnel, Ala-Kulju mentions home purchases which naturally interest both financing and insurance functions, thus regarding strategic planning for customer management.

The need for a strategic view on the use of content is generally symptomatic in the interviewed companies. Challenges mostly relate to the role of 'inspirational' or storytelling content that cannot be shown to directly affect sales or company performance.

*"I believe one day we will have a clearly-led entity carrying the name content marketing. But what the role of that entity is to relation to marketing... there is still a long way to go to truly find that connection. We are still far from the point where it would be understood how to take advantage of the content." – Telia, Kaijärvi*

In A-lehdet's answers, the strategic level became strongly evident e.g. in the interview of Sari Mikkonen-Mannila, leader of A-lehdet's Content Studio. According to her, strategic wisdom, or 'doing the right things' is the most important and, one can say, the only possible starting point for any useful content marketing productions. Mikkonen-Mannila sees the need to strengthen holistic, strategic-level thinking among A-lehdet content professionals

also, instead of just producing sporadic content pieces. Content marketing should be a strategic entity that supports the customer brand, sales, communications – and everything the company does, Mikkonen-Mannila states.

*“One could say that if our big idea for a customer is worth a ten (on the scale of 4–10), a grade 7 content piece can be acceptable within it – but if you have a grade 10 content production with no clear big idea, it will not produce any benefits. The thinking must be clear: why do we do this, and what do we do?” – A-lehdet, Mikkonen-Mannila*

The interview material gave support to Pulizzi and Rose’s (2011, 149) observation that creating content calls for understanding of its role and effectiveness within the organisation. This is a detriment for good content marketing as, firstly, a lack of a holistic view hinders exploiting total synergy in defining brand-level messages needed to be sent to readers, and, secondly, makes daily content work more difficult both in actual creation of relevant content towards supporting the strategy and undermines the strategic potential a credible status of content marketing could have.

### **5.3 Formation element: Stories humanise the content**

The formation element refers to how the content should be created. du Plessis states that “content about aspects of the brand – for example, what it stands for, or its values – should be communicated to an organisation’s target audience in the form of engaging tailor-made stories” (du Plessis 2015, 127). According to her view, content marketing that is able to tell stories resembles the natural occurrence of content in consumers’ private online media spaces as it is able to connect consumers with the brand on a deeper emotional level. This effect of engagement is present also in other observations on storytelling, as presented in Chapter 2.1.1 .

Some of the applicable phrases found in du Plessis’s research further illustrate the content of this point: “constructs good stories”, “circulates stories that are directly tied to a product or organisational brand”, “This narrative, storytelling approach”.

The art of storytelling is clearly present in my company interviews, and it seems also to be tied with the brand and what it stands for. The latter aspect, however, cannot be logically judged from the data as I did not do research on the brand, brand elements, or their appearance in the companies’ content material but the statement is rather based on

general understanding of the companies' business, brand appearance to me as a consumer and the content I have seen concerning the brand.

At Mehiläinen, the latest move in the arena of storytelling is a cooperation deal with the Moomin characters. Although this naturally is an extensive deal covering a large variety of different actions, Moomins are important also as a source of stories.

*"We are able to connect the Moomin story with ours to the extent that is much more than just a Moomin sticker. Moomin stories can be brought to become part of our everyday operations." – Mehiläinen, Uljas*

SSAB Special Steels' storytelling characteristics are clearly prominent in customer case content that has long been implemented as articles but that is now to a growing extent conducted in a video<sup>3</sup> format also. Case stories convey authentic narratives by, typically, welders of SSAB Special Steels' steel grades or manufacturers of construction machinery made of these grades, for example, speaking in favour of using SSAB's special steels. Storytelling characteristics such as authenticity, personality and emotion – propelling your brand into the hearts and minds of your prospect, customers and others, as Wubben expressed it (2012, 5) – are amplified by the right tone of voice in stories. For SSAB Special Steels' famous special steel brand Hardox, masculine, straight, and bold everyday language is a prerequisite to get readers to browse the content that they most often find via social media posts.

*"These type of stories work very well when the article or video is produced in the right way; it needs to be carefully targeted to the right receiver group and edited in the right tone-of-voice especially. Content that shows the benefits of using our product brands or presents customers generates plenty of followers, shares and likes on social media." – SSAB Special Steels, Julin*

One of Telia's success experiences in content marketing has been creating storified content on the broad and topical theme of digitalisation<sup>4</sup>.

*"We made stories on topics that we recognised readers found interesting but that are difficult to cover interestingly. We used our experts as storytellers, and thanks to that, we were able to present the theme with new angles and trustful content, much better than the general media could have handled it." – Telia, Kaijärvi*

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<sup>3</sup> see e.g. [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjFDr9nn7\\_hCdfUdWVCvARA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjFDr9nn7_hCdfUdWVCvARA)

<sup>4</sup> see <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLsBLqneXZirBfirDDE8wbd0R5R1aITbcr>

Assessed against Pullizzi's content marketing maturity model (2013, 70–74), Telia's series could be placed in the second stage, that of the 'thought leader' where the brand creates content that delivers value beyond the scope of the brand's product or service. And Telia indeed stated that this content series helped grant the company the status as a forerunner in the digital discussion and market – in contrast to marketing messages that readers rarely find interesting.

*"It is a fact that Telia's messages – usually delivered in the form of advertising – rarely interest anyone, unless price-wise maybe. This means we should be telling even more stories in the future in the form of content." – Telia, Kaijärvi*

The same type of an 'expert-in-its-own-field' phenomenon was seen at Viking Line which, as Takolander told, produced a series on its work for the environment<sup>5</sup>. This was timed together with the assembly of the new rotator sail on its cruise ship Viking Grace, which, in this way, becomes a greener alternative in cruising<sup>6</sup>.

*"This content received large audiences, even abroad, and at the same time with this huge interest we told about the other work we do for the environment, especially in protecting the Baltic Sea where our roots are. We picked a few examples from our environmental programme, such that instead of using harmful antifouling paint, divers scrub the hulls of our ships several times a year. This content series did not bring commercial benefits in the short term but it was important imago-wise." – Viking Line, Takolander*

OP and K-Rauta essentially share stories as part of their content. op.media's strategic starting point is to produce content that relates to people's everyday life, and this is many times achieved through life stories that gain lively interest on social media channels. K-Rauta<sup>7</sup> says emotion that is naturally related to one's own home and cottage makes content production easier, and inspiration related to these types of projects can be credibly shared with readers. Correspondingly, though, both OP and K-Rauta heavily also trust in sharing factual, beneficial content with their readers, which has proved popular.

Vapo's principle has been to produce content<sup>8</sup> – or stories – that could as well be published in a commercial magazine, such as the financial magazine Optio or the current affairs

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<sup>5</sup> see <https://www.vikingline.com/environment/protecting-the-baltic-sea/>

<sup>6</sup> see <https://www.vikingline.com/the-group/viking-line/vessels/ms-viking-grace/rotor-sail/>

<sup>7</sup> see e.g. <https://www.k-rauta.fi/inspiraatio-ja-ohjeet>

<sup>8</sup> see e.g. <http://poltelehti.fi/>



magazine Suomen Kuvalehti. The main point is to make people interested and find out more about energy issues.

*“If illustrated with a verb I just invented, content marketing is ‘kiinnostuttamista’, i.e. content marketing is ‘making people interested’. This ‘kiinnostuttaminen’ is important, as it’s difficult to be humble in commercial messages. And we feel that being humble makes it possible to urge people to think, and then hopefully find Vapo as an interesting actor also.” – Vapo, Martikainen*

Altogether, the interviewed companies find storytelling characteristics a natural basis for content marketing’s effectiveness, and the aim to ‘humanise’ the content is present in every company’s content; it may be existent either in the choice of medium (e.g. the video as an emotional teller), in the choice of content topics (e.g. ordinary people telling their stories), in the tone of voice (e.g. everyday language for Hardox users), in the attitude (e.g. humbleness, no preaching), for example.

The underlying assumption in content marketing that brands can become publishers, such as media is, seems to be possible for all the companies interviewed.

On the professionals’ side, the magic of storytelling is inherently present in all journalistic work. Notably, it is also proven effective in native advertising. Head of native advertising team, Mervi Rantakari, says that it is A-lehdet’s expertise to produce ‘journalistic-like and story-like content’ in native advertisements also. Honkarakenne’s native advertising<sup>9</sup> series is one example of this: the core of Honkarakenne’s content was ordinary people’s home stories that worked well in inspiring other potential home-buyers to consider Honkarakenne as a supplier of their log house or cottage.

*“We want to make sure native advertising content is just as addictive and created by journalistic means as any authentic journalistic story could be. The customer’s product is naturally also there but it is not on the top. It is our expertise as content creators to build content around the product or service so that hooks a reader. If you want to do content marketing, there is no point in doing it badly.” – A-lehdet, Rantakari*

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<sup>9</sup> see e.g. <https://www.meillakotona.fi/artikkelit/lintukoto-syntyi-kuin-feeniks-lintu-tuhkasta>

#### 5.4 Intrinsic element: Nothing should get in the way

According to du Plessis, the intrinsic element of content marketing refers to the natural aspect of the brand content; the content should be unobtrusive and part of consumers' daily online conversations. This will create a familiar brand voice and consumers could decide to join the brand conversations if they find them interesting and relevant. Du Plessis notes it is thus essential to have a good knowledge of the target audience and the particular channel. (du Plessis 2015b)

The aspiration towards intrinsic nature of content seemed to be naturally present in many of the decisions companies had made in their choices of content concepts and channels. They all talked about the need to know in which channels their customers are, recognising that they need to feed their messages where the target group is. There was a notable difference in the visibility of the brand in contents, however. Some of the companies considered that it is both a good choice and important to keep the brand clearly visible in their messages.

*"We do not even try to remove K-Rauta from the content; it is always present. K-Rauta is such a strong and broad brand that it is possible to do almost anything below it." – K-Rauta, Gyldeén*

Some of the companies had the principle of sharing some of the content – usually content aiming at influencing on broader issues – without a direct brand signature.

*"Our experience has shown that the best way to defend energy peat is to talk about everything else but energy peat." – Vapo, Martikainen*

*"When one talks about content marketing with the stress on the word 'content', it can concretely mean that the content does not mention the company's or product's name in any way at all. Otherwise one might be actually implementing marketing that is dressed to look like content." – Telia, Kaijärvi*

Despite this difference, all the companies strived after talking about matters in their content that should intrinsically interest target groups and hence get their attention. Their attempt is to add value to receivers' lives in contrast to advertising that persuades customers with purchase offerings (Hollebeek & Macky 2019).

Regarding target groups, it was evident from all comments that content needs to be targeted even more narrowly and more carefully in the future, offering very special content for that very specific target group.

*“Cat people need their own messages, dog people need their own.” – Vapo, Martikainen*

Some of the companies take their expertise onto the channels where themes and audiences related to their business area are present in general. This is, naturally, the idea behind native advertising; as A-lehdet’s meillakotona.fi website collects audience around stories and information on living, building and renovation, this could be the right environment for many housing brands to share their stories as well, as A-lehdet’s Rantakari told. Vapo, for its part, mentioned it publishes its blogs on kauppalehti.fi, the site where people interested in energy policy and economics typically buzz. Sharing its thoughts about, for example, versatile use of peat is a natural part of Kauppalehti-style discussions and hopefully make people move forward to find out more about Vapo’s objectives.

Although du Plessis’s categorisation refers to online content, Vapo’s seminars, as one example, can be classified as being intrinsic in their nature also. According to Vapo, seminars bring in people that are interested in discussion around a certain theme – that could be e.g. responsible production – and simultaneously make them aware of Vapo’s thoughts on the matter. The same applies to Vapo’s print magazine that discusses topics related to the energy market in general and contains not so much text about Vapo directly.

An illustrative example of intrinsic content marketing is Mehiläinen’s pursuit in 2018 to reach young women in regard to their health issues.

Mehiläinen teamed with A-lehdet’s young audience brand Demi that was planning to produce a totally new type of fiction series in Finland, a chat fiction called Pientä säätöä (Little fling)<sup>10</sup> directed at young women. It is a seven-episode story implemented as a video shooting that looks like a mobile phone screen with a running WhatsApp discussion between fictional characters, and published on Instagram, Facebook and YouTube.

Mehiläinen took part in three episodes of the series, appearing as an easy-to-reach healthcare provider for the young. The drama was extended by native advertising articles in both printed and web Demi as well in YouTube video contents produced by Demi’s cooperation influencers.

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<sup>10</sup> see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26fcM6ITGgI>

The Pientä säätöä chat fiction received plenty of praise; the international organisation of the native advertising professionals, the Native Advertising Institute, awarded it first prize as the Most Creative Advertising Campaign in its 2018 international competition. The story also inspired a new audience to connect with Demi with the brand receiving 5,000 new Instagram followers. Mehiläinen published the series on its own channels as well, and said that the chat fiction brought it significant recognition and clear imago benefits<sup>11</sup>.

A-lehdet's Anni Lintula stresses that when reaching for young audiences especially it is important that nothing comes in the way between the content and audience. The demand for intrinsic appearance is magnified, signifying an enhanced need to know the target audience and its preferences.

*"Content marketing needs to genuinely address the target group. It needs to add something to content experience, and it may never interrupt." – A-lehdet, Lintula*

Lintula reckons that the success for Mehiläinen's participation in Pientä säätöä was significantly due to the right channel; Demi is a community for its readers where messages inherently are receiver-centred (Laroche et al. 2012, Halligan and Shah 2010) and where Mehiläinen – although clearly labelled as one of the senders of the content – appeared as a credible party, not as an intruder.

The same intrinsic element can be found in influencer marketing where commercial messages work if they are credible and trustworthy.

*"A receiver's relationship with her or his trusted influencer is intimate; the influencer is like the best friend. It's not believable if a commercial partner tries to glue something on that." – A-lehdet, Lintula*

A-lehdet's professionals suggest that fan-based communities will be soon make their way into content marketing on a larger scale in general.

In the sports world, people simply like to spend time with the brand and to enjoy its messages – think about FC Barcelona, for example. The same type of 'intrinsic' content

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.a-lehdet.fi/yrityksille/ajankohtaista/casemehilainen>

marketing culture is now being built around influencers; the centre of people's interest is a person that also sends brands' messages.

*"The best content marketing cases are such that you do not think it is content marketing at all. You just enjoy spending time with a brand, and find it interesting and useful. For example, the best sports brands are good at this." – A-lehdet, Mikkonen-Mannila.*

Mehiläinen has teamed with the celebrity doctor Emilia Vuorisalmi<sup>12</sup> and famous skier Iivo Niskanen<sup>13</sup>, for example, who share their feelings and life in their blog posts published on Mehiläinen's site and social media channels, thus forming opportunities for the readers to engage with their idols – and at the same time maybe with Mehiläinen also.

A-lehdet's Antti Karvanen referred to electronics and game manufacturers that may give their headphones for use of an E-sports player, and organise a raffle among followers for free pairs.

*"I see this as content marketing at its purest. You get to use the headphones, you use them all the time, your product gets fans, and you thus get interest for your brand – this is content marketing." – A-lehdet, Karvanen*

Overall, Karvanen recommends that brands should leave their brand to the hands of their fans more often and with more courage – in line with Daugherty, Eastin and Bright's (2008, 16) view that publishing brands could be driven less by the publishers themselves and more by user-generated content.

*"Companies traditionally want to keep a total control on what they talk about and how they look. 'Print-the-logo-with-capital-letters' mentality is typical. One could argue that everything that a company has approved beforehand is advertising. At its best, content marketing works when the company gives its product, story, or brand to someone else to be taken forward so that you have no control of it." – A-lehdet, Karvanen*

At Telia, the need by the brand owners to control the content was sometimes seen as frustrating.

*"The corporation starts from its own angle, never from that of the readers, and that makes the difference wide between the marketing world and content world. A tight*

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.mehilainen.fi/mehilaisen-blogi/jos-et-nae-omaa-polkuasi-luo-omasi>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.mehilainen.fi/mehilaisen-blogi/holmenkollenille-kuningasta-kattelemaan?fbclid=IwAR1RZgVV5nxk1mLqmG0-o4ayjdUPCNwIhuDeFPAJtHG6J-KzzItcRNvoGD8>

*control by companies is the main reason for the generally lousy corporate content. In the end, the content has formed itself into a qualityless ball.” – Telia, Kaijärvi*

OP, who strives after a fluent production process in its content work, including as few commenting rounds from OP’s side as possible, has experienced a few ‘social media storms’ with its contents also.

*“A storm in social media may be caused by a small mistake in a content piece, or – as a journalistic producer – we have maybe handled a content topic that has proven itself to be sensitive among our readers. These types of things can be difficult as we naturally need to consider how customer react to our contents.” – OP, Ala-Kulju*

The drawback in leaving the brand engageable by receivers is the inevitable losing of control. A-lehdet’s Karvanen does not see this as a problem as long as companies trust their products. Also, skilful content and community managers have the ability to feed the content scene with proper starting pieces and to steer discussion – the engagement process – in a desirable direction.

The future might be even in smaller communities, like those 15 people playing hockey on Saturday nights in Käpylä, Helsinki for fun, or mothers of April-born babies in Tampere, Karvanen said. These could be narrow enough target groups to favourably receive a certain type of message and, if the sender and the messages are right, generate the action desired.

Partnerships can also go wrong, of course. Viking Line told how it teamed with Huutokauppakeisari, a popular television character, launching cooperation cruises with him for a period of time. The first Facebook post announcing this news was – to Viking Line’s surprise – met with disgust by many of the readers.

*“We didn’t understand that Huutokauppakeisari is such a dividing character. Although his programme has so many viewers, there’s also a big crowd that really doesn’t like him.” – Viking Line, Takolander*

## **5.5 Communication element: From texts to fan communities**

The communication element refers to the technique(s) used to convey the brand content. According to du Plessis (2015a and b), content marketers should ensure that the brand content is relevant and fulfils the consumer's current information needs. Content should be conveyed in an appealing manner, which could include, amongst others, being educational or entertaining.

du Plessis's communication element is the most obvious when looking from a perspective of a media company that produces content all the time. This element can be seen to include all content forms that are produced in order to gain a reader's interest. Usually, this is done with the help of content concepts that define in which forms and content types a company's messages will be delivered. Concepts should be derived from a content strategy and always follow that.

Typical techniques, or forms, to communicate content are naturally articles and photos or illustrations, together with a constantly time-growing load of videos, gif visuals, infographics, sound, podcasts etc. These can include different content types such as features, case stories, service journalism etc., and social media channels are their natural location for reader engagement, or conversions.

Content types were present in every interview although there was no specific question on this matter either. We do know, for example, that SSAB Special Steels' Hardox case stories get a lot of readers via social media, Telia's content on digitalisation raised plenty of interest, Mehiläinen got a lot of attention and even contacts on its native advertising content with Demi's Pientä säättöä, and Viking Line met with a not-so-loving response to its plans to cruise with Huutokauppakeisari.

OP mentioned an example of content that it considered to be successful among op.media contents; its Sijoituskoulu/Investment School videos<sup>14</sup> that shared popular and easy-to-digest information on investing in the forms of video, podcasts and articles, and with the objective of encouraging Finnish people to invest.

*"Our Investment School gained hundreds of thousands of viewers and a lot of thanks. I think its success was due to our creative, skillful content producers in-house that were able to create, plan and produce this series." – OP, Ala-Kulju*

A-lehdet's professionals foresee that multimedia content ensembles are quickly becoming more popular. They are content entities that creatively combine different content forms including texts and photos, gifs, videos, voice etc. The parts can be used separately for specific needs, for example when sharing a piece of content in a social media channel, or they can be combined into larger stories.

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<sup>14</sup> see: <https://op.media/sijoittajakoulu/>

As an example, both K-Rauta from the company's side and Anna Ruohonen from A-lehdet's side picked K-Rauta's recent content ensemble Pinnalla<sup>15</sup>/On the Surface as an example of successful content marketing. Pinnalla was born from the aim to help people with their homes' surface material solutions. It was one of the first big trials in content marketing for K-Rauta's newly-established content marketing team and effectiveness of content marketing in general. The ensemble was planned to cover a wide variety of needs for K-Rauta starting from its web content pieces all the way up to a print magazine and visual appearance of K-Rauta at the Habitare housing fair in Helsinki.

*"This was the first time when we presented surface materials in editorials, and the content was scaled everywhere. The feedback was hugely positive both from K-Rauta stores – which is very important for us – as from customers. It also raised pride inside K-rauta, showing how wonderful products we sell. This was all due to quality content; the texts, the visuals, everything was good and versatile; it could be refined to many places." – K-Rauta, Gylde*

*"The wideness gives A-lehdet the chance for better customer service since a large content entity is not just disposable, one-off content. We have built a whole world – notably around the extremely visual concept of creating mood boards – that forms a coherent, long-lasting content ensemble. Journalists know how to recycle content, and companies, especially now that they're publishers, would benefit from doing the same." – A-lehdet, Ruohonen*

With Pinnalla, engagement was sought after in many ways; for example, at the Habitare fair, visitors had the opportunity to plan their own 'mood boards', combining wall paints, wallpapers, tiles, textiles etc. in the way they liked. They could then post these mood boards on Instagram, taking part in a competition. The idea of the mood boards was widely used in all other content and marketing material and partnership contents as well.

In regard to content formats, A-lehdet representatives forecast a rise of formats that include fan culture or ambassadors of a brand message, as discussed in the previous chapter. Also, seeing a change in content forms from mere publishing of something towards more action-filled content was frequently mentioned. 'Action' refers to a variety of content initiatives

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<sup>15</sup> see e.g.:

[http://rautadigicamp.kesko.fi/campaigns/esitteet/muut/krauta\\_pinnalla\\_lehti/?\\_ga=2.197394982.844544150.1554560986-1126480719.1551036371&\\_gac=1.120528250.1554560986.Cj0KCQjwnKHIBRDLARIsAMtMHDGgIQeTOzIW30ZJoBvVz6LMJfXK1Xcx7sAz3mMjgnd4P66-iJCt8kaArJzEALw\\_wcB#/article/1/page/1](http://rautadigicamp.kesko.fi/campaigns/esitteet/muut/krauta_pinnalla_lehti/?_ga=2.197394982.844544150.1554560986-1126480719.1551036371&_gac=1.120528250.1554560986.Cj0KCQjwnKHIBRDLARIsAMtMHDGgIQeTOzIW30ZJoBvVz6LMJfXK1Xcx7sAz3mMjgnd4P66-iJCt8kaArJzEALw_wcB#/article/1/page/1)



from gamification of contents to people physically participating in an initiative launched by a brand, for example.

*“I believe in partnerships in organising happenings, giving opportunities for engagement, participation, and people to meet each other. In these times of fast feedback and more short-sighted projects, I think companies will lean more towards creating constant, sharply targeted visibility to different channels. There is a requirement to reach more narrow groups all the time, which speaks in favour of implementing crisply targeted cooperation or content.” – A-lehdet, Leino*

*“One of the greatest examples in content marketing is an English chocolate company that invited people to come to a Google Hangout at a certain time to open their chocolate bars and taste them together. The testing was recorded also, and all the attendees were rewarded with chocolate bars that the company sent them afterwards.” – A-lehdet, Voutilainen*

As an opposite in all storytelling features and interaction, however, Antti Voutilainen forecast that there will very likely be growth in various ways to do product presentations as part of content marketing. It might be influencers doing hauls in stores, YouTubers doing more unboxing videos, or celebrity people picking some of their favourite products for presentation on web pages<sup>16</sup>.

*“Many publishers today create these types of sites concentrated merely on shopping. The audience seems to find them rather entertaining, and for the seller’s benefit, they create a never-ending shopping mode for the reader.” – A-lehdet, Voutilainen*

## **5.6 Corollary element: Proof is needed but how to measure it?**

The corollary element – the outcome of the content – is probably the element of the six that causes the most discussion, confusion and also work in today’s content marketing field.

This element refers to the outcome or results of the brand content, and according to du Plessis (2015a), it should turn consumers into brand advocates who will share and co-create the brand stories and elicit word-of-mouth via social media.

Both the interviewed companies and A-lehdet professionals agreed setting clear objectives for content work and measuring the outcome is very important. Generally in the market, content is many times still produced with no clear reason why.

*“There are quite a lot of weaknesses still on the corporate side in considering where content should be published, what kind of audiences it is aiming at, how will the*

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<sup>16</sup> see e.g. <https://www.bestproducts.com/>

*audience creation continue after publishing one piece of content, and what kind of benefits should be gained from contents in the longer period.” – A-lehdet, Ruohonen*

*“Content marketing doesn’t work when a company either forgets it needs to find readers, in other words, it doesn’t have clear objectives, or it hasn’t carefully considered the brand message it wants to deliver.” – Genero, Östman*

In her explanation of measuring the outcome, du Plessis refers to rather simple things such as examples that can be measured – like sharing the content or creating word-of-mouth, or discussion on social media channels – that can be easily tracked with the help of today’s web analytics. But in most cases, judging or measuring the final outcome is not this simple. How do we measure whether content marketing has given power to the brand and created business benefits, many times measured in the increase of sales? And what do we do if the content has not achieved its target?

In other words – how do we know if it was good content?

A whole new area of expertise is born around measuring and securing success of content marketing. One of the new concepts is growth hacking that refers to all the measures that are done in order to find readers for the content; starting with securing the functionality of the technological basis for content creation and defining strategies and conduct for search engine optimisation (SEO) and search engine management (SEM).

*“Combining SEO strategy and content strategy includes that visibility of content – winning the eyes for it – is secured right from the start.” – Genero, Östman*

Östman refers to Snellman Group that has appeared as the number one in Google search results since 2012 when searching for ‘joulukinkku’, Christmas ham, largely thanks to SEO.

*“Our determined SEO work together with the kind of content that people need have brought great ROI, or return on investment. The Snellman web site can have more than 100,000 visitors a day.” – Genero, Östman*

Customers also see the mathematics of today’s content marketing.

*“Marketing today is an algorithm; for example, if there will be snow next week, we will produce an article giving stretching tips for skiers by our doctor, including our SEO strategy in the content. That interview is a trigger that we connect with all our platforms for readers to find.” – Mehiläinen, Uljas*

Monitoring the success of content is naturally important for actual content producers but it is also essential in order to gain legitimacy for the content work from the business management.

*“Conversion shows the quality and surety of aim of our content. We constantly monitor how much of the traffic transforms to sales. Content works when there is conversion, sales. Great headlines do not help at all unless they bring bookings.” – Viking Line, Takolander*

*“Finding a cause and effect on contents that the management is ready to approve has a great impact on the willingness to use content marketing. Additionally, content production becomes a lot easier when leading it with data.” – Telia, Kaijärvi*

However, complications in measuring are many. First, the user data may show content is popular but is it the right people the company reaches?

*“It is so much easier to measure how many people you get to the site than to measure if they were the right people, the ones we wanted to reach.” – A-lehdet, Voutilainen*

The same should be considered when a company is looking for a native advertising or influencer media; according to A-lehdet’s Rantakari, a log house manufacturer might benefit from publishing its content rather on A-lehdet’s meilläkotona.fi site than on a wider-spread general Finnish media site although the readership numbers of meilläkotona.fi were smaller. This is naturally because meilläkotona.fi gathers an audience already interested in the topic. The second consideration making the showing of conversions difficult is the long time that content publishing usually takes to start producing results. Telia’s Kaijärvi even mentioned a time frame, 6–8 months after which good content marketing can be expected to accrue benefits. A-lehdet’s Antti Voutilainen described that a reader might feel inspired because of something she or he read in February, and end up buying the product from the same company in July. No web data directly shows this connection.

*“The move from online to offline, from online content to the purchase action is very difficult to measure. Was the purchase due to the content? Or just due to a sunny day?” – Antti Voutilainen, A-lehdet Oy*

The same applies to making a difference between the effect of megatrends and the effect of content marketing. As Vapo’s Martikainen illustrated; if the general view strongly turns against all burning in energy production, it might seem that Vapo’s content marketing has failed completely even though the general sentiment could be the bigger reason for Vapo’s reputation measuring.

The possible money used in spreading the content further complicates the measuring. Visibility in Facebook for a company tends to demand monetary input in advertising, and,

therefore, the effect of ‘pure’ content is difficult to measure. This is reflected in Telia’s measurements.

*“Our first measurement is CPC, or cost-per-click. The number of readers you get for one euro is the best measurement to show whether anybody is interested in what we are trying to tell.” – Telia, Kaijärvi*

Telia says it calculated this rate after producing an extensive set of contents, hundreds of pieces, that gave understanding of an acceptable CPC rate both on the BtoC and BtoB sides.

As the set of objectives as well as measuring and analytics tools varies this much, how can outcome of content marketing be objectively measured? A-lehdet’s Antti Voutilainen sees that following of clicks and other actions by readers as well as different data is definitely important for content creators. With the help of data, they see what works, what doesn’t, and how a change of a headline, improved SEO work, or adjustments in Facebook advertising affect the numbers. When considering evaluation of business benefits – such as strengthening of brand power, for example – Voutilainen’s reference to North Star Metrics is interesting.

*“In North Star Metrics, instead of several measurements, the company actually only follows one objective – sales euros, for example. If you start content marketing in January and continue it for six months, a rise in corporate sales in this period in comparison to a year earlier indicates that your content marketing works.” – A-lehdet, Voutilainen*

North Star Metrics also leaves room for intuition. The content professionals at A-lehdet believe that despite the relevance of data-led content production, there’s always need for intuition in content planning and production. Experienced content producers have understanding of what people are interested in and how a topic should be presented, and it is useful to make content decisions based on this intuitive knowhow also instead of pure data.

Content objective and measuring actions, together with marketing automation solutions, are also the basis for exploiting of content in engagement or sales funnels. Related to this, OP told it was working to gain visibility to the start of the funnel especially in order to be able to show the role of its content in regard to sales. As part of the use of its marketing automation tool in the lead generation process, SSAB is planning to start giving points according to the procedure a reader executes after reading a certain content piece. For

example, an upload of a brochure would give certain amounts of points and take the uploader to a certain phase of SSAB's sales process.

A common challenge both on the companies' and professionals' side seemed to be reacting to content analysis data. There is plenty of data available but not enough time for analysis, or there is time for analysis but not for reacting. By reacting, both the companies and A-lehdet mean changes in the content or in the marketing of the content – changes in the text, SEO, altering the social media posting, buying visibility for postings, adding the article into a newsletter etc. This was seen as a valuable opportunity in finding more readers for the content.

*"We practise reacting all the time; for example, we do constant a/b testing with our content. But reacting is hard as content keeps on pouring, every day in every channel, and the mill is so big that taking conclusions forward into action is now easy. – At the moment, we think it's at least effective to react year-on-year. We can return to our content on gardening from last year and examine what worked then and what should be done differently this year." – K-Rauta, Gyldén*

*"We need to actively follow the KPIs, or Key Performance Indicators we have set with the customer and react when needed. I find this a very big opportunity in raising visibility and improving the outcome of content." – A-lehdet, Rantakari*

## **6. What did the framework miss?**

### **6.1 Why additions?**

All du Plessis's categories were relevant when considering good content marketing production. In practice, however, the categorisation felt too complicated, with many categories overlapping each other and producing a cause for confusion. Some of the interview comments and facts could have been placed in two or even three categories.

Also, some clearly notable interview data did not naturally fit in the framework.

When the research question of my thesis is to find characteristics of good content marketing implementation, du Plessis's framework needs elaboration before providing a clear but complete checklist for a company implementing content marketing or for a provider of a certain phase of the content marketing process.

I recognised three main topics that were either missing from du Plessis's categorisation or that might have been included there but would have deserved special attention to be noticed. They are: the decision on who implements different phases of the content marketing process (who does), inclusion of novel contents in the content creation process (securing the 'wow'), and consideration of human character as part of the content selection and consuming process (humans may change). They will not necessarily need to form a totally new category in the framework but they should be clearly incorporated into the framework.

I will discuss the three additions to the framework in the following Chapters 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4, and present a suggestion for a modified framework in Chapter 6.5.

## 6.2 Professionals needed – The multi-faceted field

Producing ‘good content’ seems to have become more difficult than ever. Content needs to be narrative or beneficial or visual or engaging, and it must be genuinely so, not just in the eyes of the marketing department. Many times it is better to talk about everything else but your company or its products. The content needs to be multichannel starting from the planning up to production, and it must engage everywhere from web pages to fairs. It needs to be re-usable and modifiable so that a company can administer and produce content in a cost-effective and reasonable way. It needs SEO strategies and implementation, social media marketers, marketing automatisations, optimisers and growth hackers to be found by the audience. The reactions it causes need to be moderated and facilitated by the company – in the right way, by nurturing the community.

No wonder many of the companies I interviewed were pointing towards the ongoing ‘professionalisation’ of the content marketing field. This is happening partly through content producers and other professionals moving to work at companies to even a greater extent than so far. Many Finnish companies have already built content marketing functions within their company, and this trend is expected to continue.

*“In Finland, we still confusingly mix opinion and professionalism. So many actors within companies want to take a stance in matters they really don’t have expertise in. The next phase will be to hire people that truly know whether the article or video is well done, and whether it, according to data and analytics, serves the company’s objectives.” – Telia, Kaijärvi*

Partly the content marketing field will become more professional through companies purchasing more content strategy and production work from media professionals. The content field has seen a rise in the number of new entrepreneurs entering the field either in journalism/content production or in other functions – like content strategy, growth hacking, data analysis etc. – needed for the service of content marketing.

At the same time, media companies such as A-lehdet have been developing their operations in content marketing. While they, as their competitors, are forming new positions and hiring new professionals for the employment of content marketing, they also possess traditional assets that seem to be of value in new content marketing: understanding of readers, also intuitively, and skills in producing ‘good content’. They know that it seldom is the brand message that interests a reader as such. They know how to build a story in a video or plan a

podcast that gives what this particular target listener needs. They know their grammar and their video quality requirements.

*“A typical failure is when a customer wants to try content marketing but starts from the company’s product and – forgets people. It does not think at all what could interest or entertain a human being, it just publishes product information, sporadically and many times even without any plan on sharing, or spreading, the content produced. There is very much bad content marketing.” – A-lehdet, Ruohonen*

Companies value the many sides of knowhow a content marketing professional has to offer.

*“What I expect most from our content production partner is problem solving, together. Most of our people are not content professionals, and there will inevitably be also problems on the way. It is important for me as a customer that I do not need to solve these alone but that we can find a solution together. This includes understanding of our situation and challenges on our side, including also changes that are always expected.” – K-Rauta, Gyldeén*

One tendency already seen internationally at least is that companies also hire visual experts for purchasing positions in their marketing communications services. This notably concerns visual professionals that are able to judge the level of visual expertise and make sound decisions on, for example, centralised art director purchases for the company.

*“Even company boards employ members, visualists, who are able to buy the right kind of communications and advertising services from the right places. There is no sense in buying such an important – and expensive – part of the company’s operations piece-by-piece, over and over again from different places.” – A-lehdet, Leino*

Therefore, when considering making good content marketing, a company should always also consider who is, or, rather in today’s multiprofessional content scene, who are going to plan and produce it.

On the other hand, a clear content strategy, created with the attitude of courage is likely to make content planning and production easier in certain ways. If the strategy states that the company needs to reach the 18–20 old young women with a certain objective and they are known to rely on certain influencers on the particular theme, why not give the floor to the influencers and let them take the brand with them? If they are the right people for this brand, they know how to do it so that the brand gets engagement and reward, not the other way round.



### 6.3 Secure the wow

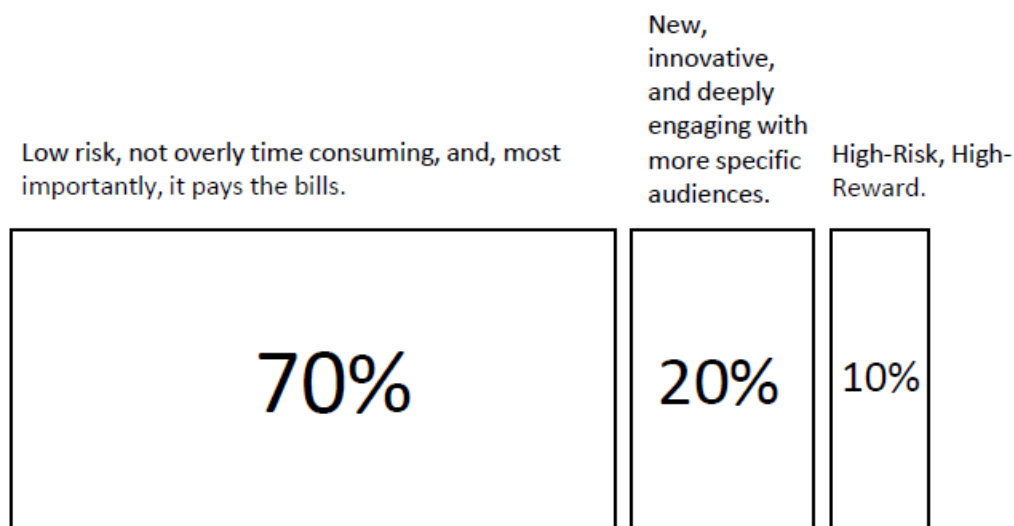
This point is probably inherently included in du Plessis's categorisation, in the categories 'construction of content', 'the technologies', and 'natural occurrence of content'. But, as this particular characteristic is so ultimately important in content marketing, it should also be written somewhere. It is the inclusion of the 'wow' in content marketing – producing something extraordinary, something new, something spectacular, experimenting, paving the way for new ways of producing media and communicating with audiences.

At this point, it is useful to present a model by Coca-Cola, the renowned content marketing pioneer and professional. I may thank Sari Mikkonen-Mannila for bringing this illustration to my attention. The model is known as the Coca-Cola 70/20/10 budget rule (Coca-Cola Content 2020) guiding content development and investment.

Coca-Cola released the model seven years ago already, and although its specific novel media or content forms mentioned are partly outdated as digital pioneers, the basic idea of the model constantly inspires.

The model is illustrated in Figure 2.

#### Coca-Cola's 70/20/10 content



**Figure 2.** Coca-Cola's 70/20/10 budget rule for content. The model divides digital content marketing investments into now, new and next with specific budget allotments. (Coca-Cola content 2020)

The model divides digital content marketing investments into now, new and next. The now of a company's digital activities and storytelling include low risk, it is not overly time consuming, and it generates income to keep the company rolling. At Coca-Cola, this includes video, basic content creation and search marketing with results that are rather easy to anticipate.

The New 20 per cent consists of content development originating from the first lot of 70 per cent. The content that worked well – according to outcome measured and shown by analysis and analytical work – in the first content box should be developed towards new, innovative, and deeply engaging content with more specific audiences. At the time of the model's creation, these were listed including social media, mobile marketing and outreach. This budget investment may not see an immediate return, but it lays the base for the future and helps in competition.

Then comes the Next 10 per cent. This is the truly new-generating part; the budget should go to high-risk, high-reward content that connects the company with its audiences in a totally new way. It is the ground-breaking ideas that have not been tried before and that could go wrong – or, when done right, could pay back a lot in the future. Together with possible monetary rewards, this content on an unseen level should also present the company as a trendsetter of the content niche.

The model is based on a systematic approach and analysis of outcome of regular content creation that inherently include the identifying and scaling of new winning ideas, the wows.

The interviews indicated companies may well be the group that will create these wow contents in the area of storytelling in the future. As readers are starting to be as ready to consume content produced by brands rather than traditional media, companies could take the lead – instead of the media – in creating new types of journalistic and other content experiences. The wows are also needs because they are the only way to get the readers' attention in the flood of contents.

*"I believe we will see completely new types of expression in content marketing in the near future. Today, content marketing borrows its forms from journalism; but, I expect it soon to take a leap towards something completely new also. There is so much content around us, and it is very difficult to catch people in that jungle. Brands need to do something extra to win attention, so – I expect a significant rise in content quality, and I expect a significant rise in marketers' courage." – A-lehdet, Ruohonen*

The rise of brand content's share as part of people's lives became apparent in many of the interviews. This was partly expected to blur today's line between 'brand content' and 'media content', making content equal in consumers' eyes regardless of its sender. Partly, this blurring was foreseen to completely fade the need for a separate concept of content marketing.

*"I have been wondering what traditional media's role will be in the new era of contents. All big and mid-sized companies already implement content marketing, and much of it is very high quality content. Who will actually consume the content produced by traditional media in the coming years? Will companies' content actually take over the whole media sphere?" – K-Rauta, Gyldeén*

*"I believe the role of the traditional media will diminish as the amount of multimedia contents by different senders will grow and take room. Content marketing will become an essential part in a company's strategic thinking as the means of the brand to discuss with its customers. Soon we will not even talk about 'content marketing'; it will be just marketing." – A-lehdet, Mikkonen-Mannila*

In this future world of equal content senders, the wow contents are the ones that will be found and that will make an impact.

#### **6.4 Note! Humans may change**

An interesting point that became evident in one interview – but could most likely be considered by many of the other participants also if it had been a separate question – was related to human nature. We now examine the content marketing field from the current position; the amount of content has increased, channels have grown in number, technology has come part of everyday life and surrounded us with even more content. We surf, scroll, like, and update.

But what if humans get tired with this? What if we just want to do something that includes no technology or devices any longer?

*"I think people will eventually get fed up with technology. At some point they will notice that it is harmful to use a device all the time. Interestingly, many people working at Facebook or Google do not let their children to use the services or devices they themselves develop. I believe people will soon realise that there should be times when you can, instead of staring at your phone, just watch trees." – A-lehdet, Voutilainen*

On the other hand, humankind has always evolved. Technology will evolve and surely provide us with surprises. But humans will too, and they will provide us with surprises. Some

of them have given up Facebook because they either do not trust it or they want to do something else instead. Some of us will surely get tired with all gadgets.

Human behaviour and its change is something companies need to take into consideration in their content marketing decisions. In the short term, not much will change – but now, already, there may be reason to check the social media channels and start thinking of other or at least additional ways of reaching consumers.

The interview answers on the question concerning content marketing's future gave some interesting aspects for consideration as possible changes in the development of technology and human behaviour. Most of them are in some parts visible today already.

**Communities** – people are said to have a basic need for being together, sharing thoughts. Therefore, community-based content marketing sounds like a good idea to take forward. Communities can be micro-scale (people that play hockey in Käpylä), or they might be huge (e-Sports games).

**Gamification** – this is related to people's desire to build communities. Games have always entertained groups, and they may be a good channel of discussion today also, especially with young people.

**Visuality** – people may read less but they watch more. The youth particularly are used to consuming visual content everywhere and all the time. Visual ways of telling stories are expected to work in the future also.

**New technologies** – they gain footing when they are easy enough to use and genuinely able to entertain or help. As long as VR or AR applications are difficult to use, for example, they will not work as content marketing tools either. But one day they, just like the internet of things, will be advanced enough, ready to connect a company and a consumer. Voice has done that already; listening is easy everywhere, and the increase of using voice in communications will continue.

**Voice-activated technology** – voice search, voice shopping, conversational customer interfaces are seen to be the next big thing, and audio content will find new imaginative forms. Marketers can create these features to provide consumers with valuable audio content – like daily news briefings, a step-by-step walk-through of a complex recipe, productivity tools, puzzles and games, or even pure storytelling efforts – that extends

audience engagement or gives users greater flexibility and control over their interactions with your brand and its products.

**Niches are everywhere** – and they tend to get smaller and more specific. A printed product might speak to one niche, a game for one. A small niche may produce a big reward if most of the members end up buying a house from you or generate word-of-mouth that praises your brand with spreadable effects.

**People may get tired with keeping up with technology** – one would rather follow you to “watch trees” (as Antti Voutilainen suggested, see above). If that supports your objective, it can be your content marketing.

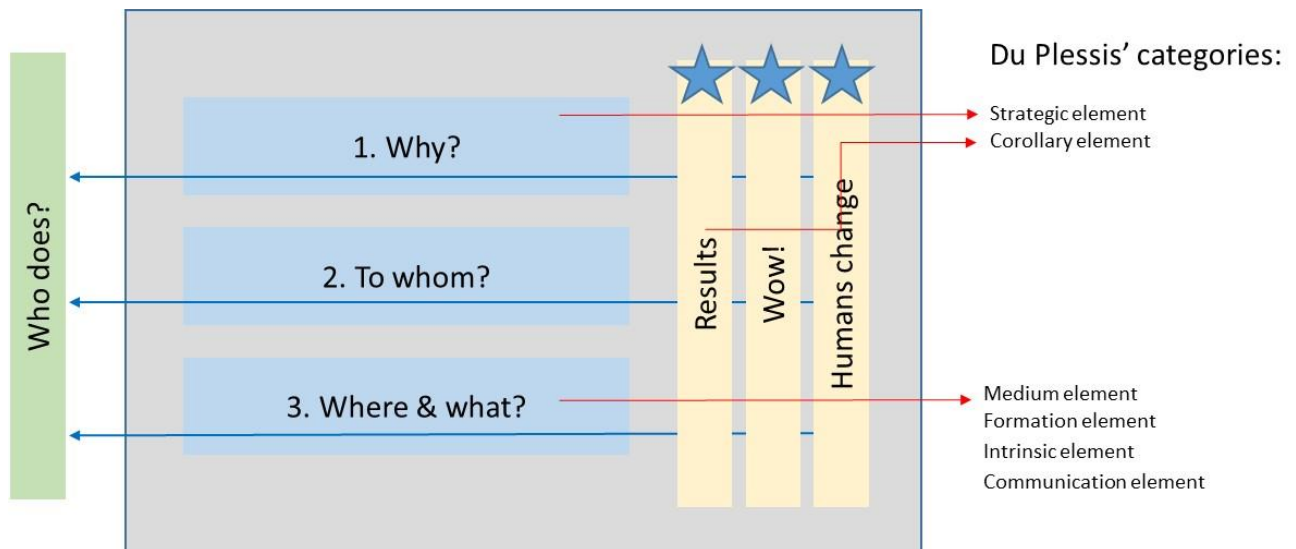
**Not everybody needs content marketing** – some target groups are better to be reached in another way.

## **6.5 Presenting the new framework**

Based on the theoretic and academic discussion on content marketing presented on previous pages and the analysis of the data of this research, I have some suggestions for the development of Charmaine du Plessis’s thematic categorisation.

The developed model is presented in Figure 3. The figure shows my proposal for a modified framework for issues that a company should consider when planning and implementing its content marketing work.

The right side of the illustration shows du Plessis’s categories in relation to the new model; i.e. which of du Plessis’s categories belong under which category of my new model.



**Figure 3.** A framework for planning and implementing content marketing. Modified from the presentation by Charmaine du Plessis (2015a).

First, the starting point of all content marketing should be strategic – there is no sense to do just sporadic content marketing or pieces of content without considering their placement in the whole, their objectives and – naturally – the delivery and sharing of the contents, as discussed in Chapter 5.2. The strategic view also includes clarifying content marketing’s role in the organisation.

*“Quality content marketing demands strategic thinking that supports the brand, communications, sales, everything.” – A-lehdet, Mikkonen-Mannila*

*“Clarifying the roles of marketing, communications, and content will remove a lot of challenges, make contents part of normal customer process.” – Telia, Kaijärvi*

*“Content marketing will not succeed if a company just publishes something. Getting attention demands deeds; optimisation, directing and buying traffic, banners etc. Many times companies just publish content – which often tends to be product information – and get disappointed when ‘content marketing’ does not work.” – A-lehdet, Ruohonen*

du Plessis did not explain in her theory whether the order of presenting the categories would indicate any preference in the process of content marketing but – in order to be clear – her category ‘strategic approach’ should definitely be placed as first.

Unless the big picture is clear, content marketing may be like shooting into the air with no target in sight. Any results at all are unlikely.

The next question to ask is what target groups need to be affected in order for the objective to come true. There's no reason to try to think what to do or where prior to this decision as different target groups use different channels.

*"Welding engineers, for example, are an extremely important target group for us as they have impact on buying decisions, and we thus need to address to them relevant content on the Hardox steels brand. The next thing for us is to think where they buzz, in other words, where we can reach them." – SSAB Special Steels, Julin*

*"The ability to genuinely address the target group is a prerequisite for content marketing's success." – A-lehdet, Lintula*

In du Plessis's classification, the recognition of target groups was included in several categories but as content cannot be made without this consideration, the point is important to address separately. The need for even more careful and detailed targeting (see 5.4) is intensified as specialties and niches are becoming the only possible way to get people to read, watch, or listen.

Based on my research, I would argue that du Plessis's categories mainly concentrate on the matters that I would headline as 'where' and 'what'. du Plessis's 'platform' category directly answers the question 'where', and the technologies category answers both questions 'where' and 'what', depending on the matter. Her 'construction of content' answers the question 'what'. Only the category 'natural occurrence of content' could also relate to my phases of 'strategy' and 'to whom', as making the content an everyday part of a reader's life can be a strategy-related question, and it also includes the understanding on to whom the content is directed. As 'natural occurrence of content' is very much dependent on the actual idea, construction and product of the content, I would still place it under my category 'where' and 'what'.

Why, then, combine these two together? Because there is no point answering these matters alone or independently. What will be produced depends on where it will be published, and where it will be produced is dependent on what is done – a web article, a podcast, a Facebook competition, a walk in the forest, etc. To be exact, the order of these two is also ruling. The 'where' comes first. The company first needs to know where the target group is. These points have been illustrated in Chapter 5.1 as examples by e.g. SSAB Special Steels and Mehiläinen, who told that they first need to know where their target audience is and will then think how to serve them there.

After knowing the channel or channels, it can be thought what, in practice and in detail, to do to gain the target group's attention.

The 'where' and 'what' includes a lot as it combines the whole process of planning and producing the content. It needs to take a stance on such steps as, for example, the selection of the content concept and story type with their storytelling dimensions, choice of media and its technical and storytelling characteristics, choice of publishing channels and the input in advertising etc., style of engagement, community characteristics, extent and distance from the brand, the storytelling characteristics of the content, media solutions. The solution could be an article or a video – or it could be an Instagram game or an action with readers?

This point is also related to the important check-ups regarding the needed wow effects – is this the point where the wow needs to be produced or is it done within another content ensemble?

*“On the strategic level, a company needs to be awake all the time; it needs to be aware of new opportunities. In production, it is naturally important to recognise what to do among the first ones and what to join only in the second wave. The decision depends on the company's objectives.” – A-lehdet, Mikkonen-Mannila*

A practical content creation process needs to, therefore, be divided into parts as decisions concern different steps. Implementing this content creation process is, however, a topic for another study.

As evident from the previous pages, content marketing has become, or is at least becoming, a serious business. It's a professional field instead of just some nice articles now and then. In addition to actual content creation, writing or photo or video shooting, it today includes a wide array of phases from strategic planning to knowledge of different publishing channels and platforms – including cooperation with commercial media including native advertising and influencer marketing – analytics, measuring and growth hacking. In addition, the content produced needs to be truly 'good', not just some kind of content.

In this situation, deciding on the resources and division of work is an important matter in implementation of good content marketing. Along with the professionalisation of the field, expertise on the specific tasks is also likely to become clearer.

*“It has been almost amusing to notice how some content marketing sellers talk about content but, actually, their knowhow on the actual content production is very thin.*



*The roles will gradually sharpen together with the development of the providers and buyers of content marketing.” – Telia, Kaijärvi*

Content marketing experts will get more specialised in their own areas of expertise, but, at the same time, a company has the need to find content synergies for the use of its different functions such as customer communication, marketing and sales, and a large number of partners may pose a risk in this regard, tying a lot of time and resources into administering, briefing and communicating along the process. The ‘who does’ question thus is a very relevant part of every content marketing process.

## **7. Discussion and conclusions**

### **7.1 Validity and reliability**

Validity and reliability are the technical terms that refer to the objectivity and credibility of research. The validity of research concerns the interpretation of observations; whether or not the inferences that the researcher makes are supported by the data, and sensible in relation to earlier research. Reliability involves assuring the accuracy and inclusiveness of research data. (Silverman 2016)

Validity in my research was established by using wide sources of data, i.e. literature reviews, digital content observations, and reviews of content marketing case examples as the basis to examine the research topic from various angles and thus providing a versatile view on the theme, and, consequently, a sound ground for the selection of valid interview groups and questions.

The limited number of the interviewees and their selection may be claimed to pose restrictions on any generalisations of the research results. A larger number of attendees could have produced more data with probably more viewpoints. However, with the seven interviewees already I could see answers starting to repeat themselves; all agreed that content marketing was important and would grow, all saw the same challenges in measuring impacts or responding to analytics results in production, all relied on social media in their content's marketing and so on. It could be argued that the same general patterns could have been repeated if there had been more respondents. Actual content marketing strategies and measures are naturally different but as this research was concentrated on a higher level, describing good content marketing prerequisites in general, there was no reason to go into details.

The selection of the persons interviewed could be said to have been appropriate in regard to the research question; they all represented people making decisions and developing content marketing strategy and actions in their companies and, thus, they had pre-thought views and ideas on the field and an overall perception of the situation both in their own company and elsewhere in the content marketing world.

With a different set of companies, the focus of the results could have been different. On the other hand, the companies ended up being very randomly picked, and it could thus be

claimed that these results depict the general situation as well and as reliably as any other grouping or number of companies would have.

What this uncertainty on the right selection and number of companies still indicate is that the results obtained in this research can't necessarily be generalised to cover all companies in their content marketing assessment.

For the A-lehdet data, the number or selection of attendees is not as random as in the case of the companies. The people related to content marketing at A-lehdet is more limited, and, as they all work in the same company under the same strategy, all of these people possess more or less the same frame of reference as the starting point for content marketing. It is more this point that leads to reservation regarding validity of results; work at A-lehdet offers a certain state of mind when thinking of content marketing. All the interviewees work within the same reality, which naturally affects their views on the field. The answers can be examined from the point of view of a large, prominent media house and a publisher that is looking for new streams of revenue from a new market.

All the interviewees, both from customer companies and A-lehdet, naturally also speak from the position they now have in their respective company. I do not see this as a problem for my research, though; the study is looking for general views on what is good content marketing, not absolute truths. Therefore, any bias towards one's own company doesn't pose a threat to the validity of the results as such.

Reliability of my thesis results was increased by a pre-formulated set of theme interview questions that was presented to all interviewees, and by a careful process of documenting and classifying the answers with equal criteria for the answers. As inherently characteristic for qualitative research, both interview answers as well as their classification and interpretation include subjective elements depending on the understanding of the questions and their framework by the interviewee and the reading of the answers by the researcher. If repeated, the result of this research would not necessarily be exactly the same.

All this taken together, the results of this thesis should not be taken as mere truth and self-evident facts. They should be examined from the point of view of every single company answering, its choices and objectives for business success.

As such, they however depict an interesting scene on matters Finnish companies work with in their content marketing and challenges and successes they face in that work. Combining those experiences and expectations with those of the A-lehdet content marketing experts, it is possible to draw conclusions on the current scenery in content marketing in today's Finland and make predictions about its development in the near future. This will hopefully help companies to plan for better content marketing solutions and products for the success of their business.

At some point of my research planning, I had an idea to also look for some similarities within the BtoC companies and BtoB companies in their content marketing, as well as to find commonalities in content marketing needs and assessment within the companies operating in a certain business area; living or health especially as they are A-lehdet's focus areas. As the number of companies that I would be reasonably able to analyse qualitatively ended up being only 7, those types of comparisons lost their ground. Therefore, the single companies only present any company in my research, with no business area or nature of business taken into account in my analysis as such.

## **7.2 Discussion**

My thesis aims to find out how to make good content marketing. The need arises from the fact that content sent by companies is seen as an effective means of communication with customers (Pulizzi 2012) – on the contrary to traditional advertising in many cases.

Accordingly, a majority of companies already implements content marketing as part of their marketing communications and the number is expected to rise. In today's cacophony of messages only the best of the best will succeed in leveraging their messages to audiences – it is, therefore, beneficial to know how to be one of the best.

I examined my research question based on a framework presented by Charmaine du Plessis (2015a and 2015b) which considers aspects relevant in planning and implementing content marketing. As my research results demonstrated a need for modification of the framework, I concluded my research by presenting a new framework for formulating content marketing decisions by companies or content marketing practitioners.

As evident from the company interviews, content marketing is widely used in Finnish companies as well. Some of the companies interviewed, like K-Rauta, have just recently entered the scene, while others, such as OP and Vapo, for example, have been doing

content marketing much longer. The companies share a deep interest in developing their content marketing and the understanding of its changing nature. However, some of the companies still supposedly lack a strategic, company-wide view on their content marketing, which results in a deficiency of shared objectives within the company. On the professionals' side, among A-lehdet participants, the lack of a wider 'why' was seen as frustrating, as it is likely to result in sporadic content marketing productions that might be good as such but are unlikely to find the support, understanding or larger share of resources from the company, or to produce any long-term, sustaining business benefits, thus supporting previous research views by du Plessis (2015a and 2015b), Pulizzi (2012) and Vinerean (2012), for example. My research data showed such strong support for the importance of a strategic basis for content marketing that my modified framework places this point as first in any content marketing related decision.

Defined content marketing strategy would also help in setting the degree of freedom that content creation is allowed in a company. Some of the interview data suggested that a deficient understanding of the way of acting of content marketing in comparison to marketing or advertising is one of the main factors preventing the creation of customer-centred content that interests people.

The need for courage and boldness in storytelling was expressed by a few of the companies interviewed, but it was even more clearly present in A-lehdet's interviews. Some of the A-lehdet participants even stated that no brand content is content marketing as long as it includes a company signature – in those cases it is pure marketing. They saw that content marketing works at its best when the strategically well-defined brand is given – with trust, and as customer-centred contents – into the hands of communities, fans, and a general audience, granting them an opportunity to engage with the brand and its messages.

Engagement – a concept seen fundamental in content marketing by e.g. Pulizzi (2013) and Muntinga et al. (2011) – is possible when a company approaches its target audiences in the audiences' trusted channels, and in the ways natural to them. These characteristics are included in du Plessis's framework of 'medium element', 'formation element', and 'intrinsic element'.

Engagement is also an action needed when walking the reader along a sales funnel with the help of content. The concept of the sales funnel (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016), interests my

interview companies as an important development target as, specifically, the means of showing the impact of contents to sales within a company.

Although this thesis is not able to state whether the company logo should be visible in contents or not, the data suggests that increasing courage and trials also – the 10% of the Coca-Cola's model (see Figure 2) – would give a company the opportunity to create wow contents that are needed for the recognition and engagement by audiences. As continuation, my research suggests that visionary content creation would also take companies closer to the view that brand media can act as a publisher (Pulizzi 2012, 117) in the same way as the traditional media, and that it can be companies that lead development of new media solutions and engagement instead of the traditional media.

The 'wow' also relates to the need for content marketing practitioners to constantly anticipate the preferences of audience. Humans change, and coming changes in ways of life and interests should be foreseen by content strategists in order to remain relevant in people's minds and to be able to bring results from content encounters. I therefore added a separate note 'Humans change' in my modified framework to be considered in strategic planning and content implementation.

Because today's content marketing field demands a wide variety of expertise, professionalisation of the content marketing field is expected to quicken in Finland also. Considerations on the division of work were evident in the interviews already. On the professionals' side, the intuitive knowledge of audiences and their content preferences – the journalistic skill – were considered as valuable assets in creating content that many times needs to talk about anything else but the company's products, as mentioned in my interviews. Storytelling is not possible without knowing how to do it.

In addition, there is a need for decisions on setting and measuring objectives and reacting to them – an important point in du Plessis's framework – , securing the reach of readers, and interconnecting content to different sales and other infrastructures needed in the company. The area of growth hacking, or maximising the reach of contents, as well as measuring objectives and reacting to them seemed to be one of the most challenging areas at the moment for the companies. Mastering all areas is demanding but necessary since "if a company does content marketing, there is no point in doing it badly", as A-lehdet's Rantakari said.

The sphere of different actions and actors required in content marketing processes is wide and varied, and organising and staffing of it all calls for a more prominent status within a content marketing framework than what the original du Plessis's classification granted it. I therefore placed the question 'Who does' as an important element of my reformulated framework.

### **7.3 Conclusions**

My research showed rather little difference in views on implementing good content marketing among companies sending content to their customers and, on the other hand, professionals conducting content marketing at A-lehdet.

Both saw the importance of content marketing notable as means of a company's marketing communications palette, forecasting a further rise in the significance of contents. On both sides, there were also predictions that companies will be able to produce completely new types of content solutions and take, in their turn, the lead in creating new media phenomena and presence. Both also relied on the need to know the target group and reach them where they are, in ways they find natural.

The most notable differences were found in the stressing of the importance of the strategic level and objectives for content marketing, the degree of courage and distance from the brand and product messages in content creation, and the processes related to securing the widest possible audiences for the content, measuring contents' success and reacting to the results. These are some of the areas that will, without a doubt, be under development in Finnish companies in the coming years, which will further professionalise the field of content marketing.

Almost movingly, my research unanimously repeated one thing – once again: Content is the king and it will be the king, all my interviewees said. The whole infrastructure around content marketing becomes redundant unless there is a story, an emotion, or a benefit to a reader.

But general content is not enough. It needs to be crystal clearly meant for someone, just for me. That is the only way to make me read, watch or follow it. Careful following of people and their interests, in a targeted way, will be the key to reach them, also in the future.

Based on the widely common understanding of content marketing, modifying a framework for the planning and production of content marketing was rather clear and straightforward. The new framework takes into account all topics relevant for consideration, both from companies' and professionals' sides, when aiming at effective content marketing. When having du Plessis's framework as the working theory and basis of my research, I added the elements of 'To whom', 'Wow', 'Humans change', and 'Who does' to the new framework. I also reorganised the former framework's existing elements in an attempt to clarify the overlapping of the classifications and to lift up the absolutely most important matter, the strategic element as the first place. I presented the new framework in Chapter 6.5.

When considering the success of my research, the fairly harmonic outcome between the different sides of interviewees could raise questions. Sharing views on good content marketing and good content marketing processes may indicate that there is a deep understanding of content marketing on both sides. As the attendees were all professionals, this is also likely. What is also possible, however, is that problems or doubts regarding content marketing, or deficiencies in content marketing processes among respondents were not commonly expressed or visible in the interviews. For example, many of the interviewees did not present an example of 'bad content marketing' when asked. More variety could have been gained by adding the number of attendees as well, while at the same time widening the selection of company industries and adding companies to the side of content marketing professionals.

One could also ask whether my research was able to produce anything new in the content marketing process. Most of the prerequisites listed were self-evident for a reader that follows the content marketing sphere. On the other hand, companies' examples of the contents they had produced depicted a good overall picture of today's content marketing scene, showing that there are already professional 'publishers' in today's Finnish corporate world that believe in content marketing and conduct it in a wide variety of ways. The discussion on the control of the brand in content marketing is always important as it may affect reaching readers, as is the fact that the audience consists of humans that have its interests and that may change irrespective of whatever ideas companies have.



What I find most important, especially, in my research results is to remind the companies that they should aim for more, for those 'wows' as that is the only way to stand out in the crowd and, on the other hand, develop one's own content marketing.

The thesis also illustrates the wide array of functions and actors related to today's content marketing. As such, it is likely to advance the level of professionalisation of the field and to help to raise content marketing as an important item in companies' marketing budgets, contributing to a company's success through different means of audience engagement.

As possible continuation to this research, it would be useful to investigate successful content marketing initiatives or cases and to analyse what factors specifically secured their success and contributed to it.

Also, deepening the understanding of the actual process of content creation, the questions 'where' and 'what' would be beneficial as the planning and production part of content is a demanding art of its own, added with the existence of the brand and the customer of the brand that may form a framework of their own within this process.

The setting of objectives and analysing the performance of content marketing is an area that constantly calls for clear understanding, especially as organisations would badly need some evidence of content marketing's benefit for its performance. The research and practical implementation of an integrated funnel of content marketing, marketing and sales is only at its beginning, and would give reason for several further studies.

In regard to the phrase used somewhat loosely in my discussion, 'human nature', it would be an interesting area of investigation to independently examine how the content usage of people is developing and will develop in the future. Anticipation is the only way to keep on top of things in the world of good content marketing.

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